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## A Critical Reflection on Adaptation of Teaching Practices

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Critical reflection is the process of increasing one's awareness, recognition, and comprehension of the types of factors and assumptions that impact and guide teaching (Brookfield, 1995). It is essential in the development of a teaching philosophy and pedagogical framework that fosters effective instructional practices and increased student learning. Critical reflection has been described as a necessary tool in helping instructors to evolve, shift paradigms, and meet the demands of an ever-changing academic landscape (Brookfield, 1995) and an increasingly diverse student population (Liu, 2015). Evolving as instructors and shifting paradigms requires that we engage in three tasks similar to those involved with scientific revolutions. We must be able to do the following: (a) identify anomalies; (b) respond appropriately to crisis; and (c) take advantage of new discoveries (Kuhn, 1970). Critical reflection makes it possible for instructors to be analytical and purposeful in how we accomplish these three tasks and to integrate all three in ways that allow for meaningful and dynamic changes to our own pedagogy. As three experienced faculty members, we chose to engage collectively in this type of reflective process. The purpose of this paper is to share our critical reflection which has been useful in helping us to understand the types of anomalies, crises, and new discoveries observed within our learning environments and our efforts in shifting paradigms to accommodate changes in the student populations that we teach.

The critical reflection process was prompted by the sharing of our independent observations regarding challenges in teaching Millennial and Generation Z students in Communication Sciences and Disorders (CSD), who have been described as perfectionists (Beck et al., 2017) and whose personal and academic values do not appear to be aligned with our own (*anomaly*) (Shatto & Erwin, 2017). Two of us identify as Baby Boomers and one as a member of Generation X. In addition, we had noticed a continuing increase in the number of communication sciences and disorders (CSD) graduate students who report experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (*crisis*). At the same time, along with our students we have had increased access to rapidly evolving technology resources and platforms that have an impact on the way that students interact and respond to their academic environment and educational process (*new discovery*).

### **Anomaly: Characteristics of CSD Graduate Students**

Traits related to learning preferences of the Millennials have included their preferences for individualized material and working in small groups, along with a sense of academic entitlement (Goldman & Martin, 2016). Generation Z has been described as preferring and expecting explicit guidance, immediate support, and formulaic answers to complex problems and challenges that require critical analysis, forethought, and planning to reach effective resolutions (Miller & Mills, 2019).

### **Crisis: Impact of Stress on the Mental and Emotional Well-Being of Graduate Students**

Personal, academic, and environmental factors are among the stressors that impact the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of graduate and professional students (Van Berkel & Reeves, 2017). These types of stress can limit a student's professional development and ability to learn (O'Reilly et al., 2014). Personal stress can include issues related to work/life balance, finances, personal relationships, and family responsibilities (O'Reilly et al., 2014). Academic stressors include issues related to course and curriculum requirements, student attitudes, and perception of their academic competence (Kiessling et al., 2004). Academic stress is also related to a student's

ability to manage time and resources for exams, classes, and studying (Hurst et al., 2012). Environmental stressors have typically been defined as those physical, chemical, biological, and socio-political features of an individual's environment that may impact overall emotional and mental well-being (Agid et al., 2000). As we conducted our critical reflection process, environmental stress increased with the onset of the COVID-19 crisis which has drastically altered daily behaviors and living patterns of students. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2020) reported that an infectious disease outbreak can cause stress-related symptoms including but not limited to changes in sleep or eating patterns, difficulty concentrating, and exacerbation of existing mental health conditions. In college students, stress can increase test and presentation anxiety, loneliness, and make it difficult to manage transitions and make tough decisions (Bhujade, 2017).

### **New Discovery: Information Technology**

The dynamic nature of technology and its growing influence on how information is delivered has a significant impact on day-to-day routines, classroom learning opportunities, and resources available to faculty, students, and staff on college campuses. Several reports indicated that technology is impacting classroom learning in the following ways: more availability of digital materials for course content (e-textbooks, videos, etc.); more options for course delivery environment (face to face vs. online vs. hybrid); increased opportunities for communicating with students; and increased variety of course management systems and platforms (Allen et al., 2012). Increased digital communication has also resulted in increased faculty workload and perceived levels of stress. Additionally, as a result of the COVID-19 ecological context, the necessity of remote learning and simulated clinical experiences that can be accessed virtually have made online environments a necessity. In a report in the ASHA Leader, 89% of university faculty indicated that teaching remotely was a major challenge they face during the current pandemic (Volkers, 2020).

### **Reflecting on the Impact of Anomaly, Crisis, and New Discovery on Teaching Practices**

Changes in characteristics of CSD graduate student populations, an increased student perception of stress and concerns about mental/emotional well-being, and a booming integration of technology in college classrooms have had a profound impact on the types of teaching and learning experiences that are occurring in CSD programs across the country. In evaluating how our teaching has been impacted by these anomalies, crises, and new discoveries we engaged in critical reflection regarding our experiences of working with students in CSD.

Over the course of six weeks, we began meeting and reviewing the literature on the issues outlined above. We engaged in discussions about our personal backgrounds, generational characteristics, and experiences in teaching CSD students. We have each taught CSD students for more than 15 years at different institutions, with combined experiences including undergraduate, graduate, face to face, and online learning courses. Each of us completed a written narrative responding to the following question "How do you think the factors described as anomalies, crisis, and new discovery (Millennial and Generation Z characteristics, changes in mental and emotional well-being, and new discoveries) have impacted your teaching effectiveness and or ability to teach?" We framed the discussions using key concepts of critical reflection that include understanding the instructor's background, previous experiences, assumptions, events, etc. (Brookfield, 1995).

Based on our reflections and a review of the literature in teaching and learning we were able to generate four recommendations at the individual and system level that can move us forward with

taking action to develop philosophies and practices that can accommodate a dynamic student population.

### **Recommendations at the Individual Level**

#### **Align and adapt teaching practices with student preference and specific course content.**

Hadley and Fulcomer (2010) showed that direct instruction is one of the more frequently used models of instruction ranking third of the six evaluated. However, large group lectures, specifically without the use of PowerPoint slides or discussion, is one of the least preferred methods of instructions for students (Roseberry-McKibben et al., 2016). As instructors, we can assess how often we use certain models of instruction and how they align with student preference, adapting to student preference when appropriate. Furthermore, adaptation to course content can occur in several ways. Some research indicates that student learning of abstract and high-level content, such as with evidence-based practice (EBP), is improved when definitions and hands-on activities were presented to the students (Grillo et al., 2014). When discussing EBP across other courses, instructors can modify their instruction to fit this model.

**Access training in the use of technology.** Technological support can be incorporated into the classroom to match students' enthusiasm for the use of technology, including the use of game-based learning platforms to allow students to participate using their smartphones, tablets and/or laptops (Roseberry-McKibben et al. 2016). Furthermore, the challenges faced by faculty who had never used Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Webex to deliver course content during the COVID-19 pandemic provide insight into how programs will need to proceed in the future. Successful instructors should seek out training opportunities on the use of technology to deliver and manage course content. Although the use of technology has the advantage of appearing to increase student engagement, using course management systems, virtual environments, and other technological tools to their full potential will require extensive safeguards, preparation, and training for students and instructors (Ferdig et al., 2020)

### **Recommendations at the System Level**

**Provide support for effective teaching and learning with IT support and training.** Research indicates that, in spite of presumptions about Millennials and Generation Z as “digital natives”, students in college classrooms continue to need support and training on technology used in classroom environments and explicit guidance on how to connect their digital learning activities to the knowledge, structure, and processes of course learning objectives (Watson & Pecchioni, 2011). Teaching and learning resources should be provided to faculty given the increased importance of online pedagogy. This could include collaboration with instructional designers and technological support.

**Provide support for student wellness through student programs /services.** Programs such as yoga classes and mindfulness practice, could also be helpful in addressing student stress (Beck & Verticchio, 2014; Beck et al., 2017). In addition, communication with faculty, increased communication about stress resources available, and classes/seminars have been identified as strategies to help students manage stress (Lieberman et al., 2018).

As faculty, we continue to refine and develop instructional frameworks and practices to meet the ever-changing needs of students. We found critical reflection to be beneficial in shifting paradigms as individuals. These types of reflections are crucial at the individual level but there is merit in performing them at the departmental and organizational level as well to promote systemic change. We encourage readers to refer to other resources examining relevance and evidence for critical reflection (Fook et al., 2016) on instructional design and practices in today's educational environment (Ferdig et al., 2020).

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The first two authors are employed at a private institution in the United States.

The third author is employed at a large public institution in the United States.

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