

ASSOCIATION OF ATLANTIC UNIVERSITIES

Institutional Award Winner's Retreat
Thursday, October 14th, 2021
Held online due to COVID-19 pandemic

Faculty Development Bulletin

Fall 2021

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Facilitators: Maryanne Fisher, Department of Psychology, Saint Mary's University, recipient AAU Distinguished Teaching Award 2016
Danny Dyer, Department of Mathematics and Statistics, Memorial University, recipient AAU Distinguished Teaching Award 2017

When do students and course instructors give mercy to others, or seek it out?

The topic of our retreat, mercy prevailing over justice, was well timed given that the Thanksgiving weekend had recently passed. Before the retreat, questions were sent out asking about one's individual experiences with mercy, as a student, as an instructor, and about the risks associated with being merciful.

We began the retreat with the idea that mercy is not about being dismissive, but rather about helping others feel a sense of forgiveness. We discussed how it can be used in a way that allows the student to reconnect with a course, returning with a feeling that is productive, whereby they renew a commitment to the class that

they otherwise may drop or do poorly in. It may be a student who did not turn in a required piece of work, but with mercy, the instructor can help them navigate the course and complete it in a satisfying manner.

Initially, when we were young, newly minted instructors, we walked a hard line between academic integrity and fairness to students, no matter the exceptional circumstance. We were concerned that extending mercy to one student would lead other students to sense unfairness, or that we were inadvertently putting other students at a disadvantage. As more mature instructors, we see now that extenuating situations arise, and that mercy is often truly needed when requested.

We talked about times we received mercy as a student and each of us was able to pinpoint a specific instance from an instructor. In one case it was an instructor asking what they could do to help a student who was having difficulty with course content, which led to the student feeling understood as a person, with their fear to seek help being recognized. Another recounted how an instructor supported their request to miss an exam and participate in a chance-of-a-lifetime sporting event that they would have missed out on otherwise. Yet another attendee talked about an instructor creating an alternative evaluation when it was realized that the student was simply not motivated by an assigned topic. Together, these and other recollections revealed that we felt mercy, and want to pass mercy along to our students. This philosophy may be met by criticism from those who are more rule-abiding in their classrooms, or who had it hard as a student and believe their own students should also face hardship as part of their training.

There are limits on when mercy can be provided. In some cases, time limits on evaluations are needed, or there are constraints on how assessments can be delivered. Co-workers might be negatively affected if a decision in one course has repercussions on other courses. Further, we all dislike when our compassion or generosity is taken advantage of and we are left feeling disappointed or deceived. Simultaneously, we grapple with penalizing or being overly punitive on the 95% majority who abide with course policies and practice, in an effort to catch the 5% who are being deceptive. Ultimately, we feel let down when we provide mercy to those who may be acting with minimal integrity. Perhaps

using flexibility to minimize students' needs to ask for mercy is a solution, and one that would address cultural, socio-economic, and historic imbalances. A portion of students may never ask for help, and a course-wide practice of flexibility in deadlines or assignment formats may address this issue, while concurrently decreasing the possibility of a student seeking mercy under deceptive circumstances.

These discussions led to the feeling of being human; students are humans in need, at times, of compassion and help. So, too, are instructors; situations arise where we, or a colleague, might need mercy. As humans, these calls for help go beyond that particular moment or issue but instead extend to the overall person. COVID-19 has certainly shown us the need to be flexible, act with mercy, and to see and perceive the suffering of others. Mercy, seen in this way, is powerful. When shared, individuals feel less isolated and may then pass mercy along to others.

There are gaps that remain to be addressed. Department Heads see the whole student in a way that instructors do not, and the continuity of care across courses is often really key to success. Mercy, when extended to a student as a member of a department, rather than a member of a course, is important. One way to address this need is to talk with other instructors or colleagues to ensure that students are thriving, and flag those who might benefit from mercy at a department level.

Near the end of the retreat, Danny led a discussion on pandemic kindness. Although higher-learning institutions

repeatedly are sending messages to be kind during the pandemic, these messages feel shallow or mechanical. On the one hand, people deserve to be treated kindly regardless of the pandemic, but on the other hand, being kind can become tiring, overwhelming, and taxing. Some instructors may be feeling they are running out of steam, which may be causing them to look at such messages more cynically.

The curriculum over the pandemic has caused many instructors to reduce their content to the essentials. They have had no option at times but to exercise trust – trust toward students and colleagues, so that when there is nothing left to give, they can lean on each other. The analogy of scuba diving was used; many of us feel that we are all sharing the same tank, taking a breath and then passing it along to help others, and hoping that it comes back to us again. Mercy, then, is something that we need to show each other, and to have others show to us.

We closed the retreat with various practical tips for helping create a more merciful class. This included:

- allowing students to create homework or exam questions
- allowing students choice in assignments
- finding ways to build community online
- flexibility in scheduling meetings
- reduce reliance on exams and instead students create a test, justifying inclusion of questions and answers
- helping students to cope with test anxiety

- use of partial problem sets so students feel competent
- crowdsourcing open access materials for course content
- requesting that students work collaboratively

Many potential avenues exist to encourage students to show mercy to each other, and to instructors, and for instructors to extend mercy as well.