CRISIS TEACHING & ACTIVE LEARNING: BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

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INTRODUCTION

When crisis forces a change to the learning environment, instructors shift into crisis teaching. Transformation born of necessity, instructors are forced to quickly investigate and employ new and different instructional strategies and tools. While the global COVID-19 pandemic has thrown a spotlight on crisis teaching, educators and librarians have a long tradition of meeting challenges precipitated by crises in smaller communities for as long as education has existed. Successful crisis teaching has shown it is important to know the learners, build community, and maintain mutual high expectations between learners and instructors. In these pandemic times, the struggle becomes how to marry crisis teaching with strategic information literacy skills. Immediate availability and abundance of information, coupled with the mental strain of existing in a time of crisis, limits the learner’s ability to filter the deluge and restricts their ability to make meaningful connections. One way to address the struggle is to integrate active learning into instruction. Active learning moves learners from a passive learning scenario to active engagement in the learning process. Active learning augments crisis teaching because it has shown to encourage development of community, collaboration, critical thinking, and significantly enhances learner and instructor engagement. Because the pandemic has precipitated one of the longest wide-spread periods of crisis teaching, those practices adopted and proven effective during this time will frame future instructional practices. It is imperative that librarians in their role as instructors learn and incorporate highly-effective teaching methods, like active learning, into their regular instructional practice.

This interactive LOEX 2021 conference session introduced participants to the principles of crisis teaching, exposed how active learning and strategic information literacy instruction can be used to meet the needs of diverse learners and instructors, and discussed how practices adopted and proven effective during the pandemic will frame future instruction. Participants were invited to consider various crises to identify the possible needs of learners and instructors, then determine and explain why an active learning strategy might or might not fit those needs.

For the purposes of this article, the term instructor will be used to refer to traditional teaching faculty as well as librarians and information professionals, whom the authors view as teaching professionals. Similarly, the term learner will refer to traditional students as well as others participating in the role of a learner.

CONTEXTUALIZING CRISIS

In order to explore the concept of crisis teaching and its intersection with strategic information literacy instruction and active learning, one must first understand what a crisis is. A crisis is “an event or situation that arises suddenly or reaches a tipping point in its severity that significantly disrupts lives and that may have long-term, harmful consequences on individuals or groups” (Taylor, 2020). These unexpected events create instability and uncertainty from what was familiar, predictable, and controllable, with such severity that they may be experienced as trauma (Imad, 2020; Taylor, 2020). They trigger an immediate need to act decisively in the hope damage can be minimized (Taylor, 2020).
Crisis Teaching

In times of crisis, whether communal or individual, instructors shift from their everyday instructional practices into crisis teaching. A transformation born of necessity, crisis teaching (CT) forces instructors to investigate, adapt, and employ new instructional strategies and educational tools in a short period of time with little training or support. The prolonged pandemic has exposed CT to the world as instructors worked to ensure learners are growing and succeeding. It is important to note that instructors have long met challenges precipitated by crises (Foster, 2006). Consider refugee camps, war-torn countries, home or school fires, or loss of a beloved instructor. Learning doesn’t stop, instruction is instead modified to reflect the following principles of CT.

Be Aware

Be aware of what may be happening in the community and cognizant of micro-communities and the potential impact on learners, fellow instructors, and yourself. Adopting a pedagogy that recognizes learners’ past and present experiences, reflecting on one’s own or others’ humanity in similar scenarios, and being aware of current events enables instructors to provide safe, empowered, and connected learning environments (Chick, 2013; Imad, 2020b).

Do Something

A 2007 survey of college students who had experienced communal and individual crises revealed that learners prefer their instructors “do something” (Chick 2013); that is, don’t sweep the elements of the crisis under the rug. The specificity of “something” is not important as it can be tailored to the uniqueness and scope of the situation. Learners—and instructors—need the space for decompression, community, and sense making.

Know Your Learners

By being aware of current events, instructors can anticipate learners’ needs in a crisis (Foster, 2006). Reaching beyond simple contextual awareness to developing relationships, even in the short-term, eases learners’ anxiety and promotes learning (Ravitch, 2020). A phrase often attributed to author John C. Maxwell is [learners] don’t care what you know until they know you care. Teaching, especially in times of crisis, is as much about care-taking as it is about instruction.

Build Community

Enveloped in but not an automatic byproduct of the first three principles of CT, building community takes intention. This is certainly the case in a suddenly virtual environment that has since transitioned in and out of hybrid and flexible instructional scenarios. An individual’s need for connectedness, especially during extended times of isolation and prolonged uncertainty, enables learners and instructors to embark on a shared purpose (Foster, 2006; Imad, 2020b).

Mind the Cognitive Load

In a crisis, learners’ cognitive processes are distracted by the immediacy, stress, and uncertainty of the event (Chick, 2013; Johnson, 2020). Structuring learning tasks that are succinct and purposeful, and eliminating overly complex material, enables instructors to efficiently push new knowledge through learners’ working memory for long term retention.

Maintain Mutual High Expectations

In a crisis, individuals yearn for structure and clarity. Providing clear expectations echoes a sense of normalcy, predictability, and security (Johnson 2020; Ravitch 2020). Expectations are not solely what the instructors expect of learners, but also the instructors’ expectations of themselves and learners’ of instructors and their peers. Conversation around “what do you need from me...” and mindfulness of the preceding principles provides a platform for communicating needs and expectations (Foster, 2006).
IDENTIFYING LEARNER & INSTRUCTOR NEEDS

Focus in higher education is often placed on esteem and achievement, with emphasis on research, publication, and academic prowess. According to Abraham Maslow’s *Hierarchy of Needs* (1943), an individual’s basic needs must be met before they are motivated to accomplish more lofty, aspirational goals.

Maslow’s theory of human motivation [Figure 1] rests on a foundation of physiological needs: food, water, shelter, and warmth. Once these are met, an individual innately shifts to fulfilling their need for security, safety, and providing for sustenance. Likewise, progress up the pyramid continues toward belonging, esteem, and self-actualization as lower needs are met.

![Figure 1: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs](https://openstax.org/books/psychology/pages/1-2-history-of-psychology#term19)

The pandemic initiated an almost immediate crumbling of individual’s lower two, if not three, tiers. Ignoring the mounting uncertainty, even with hopefulness and optimism for a short duration and speedy recovery, was unrealistic. The crisis’s byproducts quickly stretched into personal and professional lives, shifting focus to addressing more basal needs while struggling to maintain a sense of normalcy (Imad, 2020a, 2020b). When foundational needs are not met or are in flux, the individual is distracted and, consciously or not, focused on fulfilling those needs (Ravitch, 2020). Naturally, these concerns heighten learners’ and instructors’ anxiety and take priority over esteem, self-actualization and education.

Needs of Learners and Instructors

For many, being in class offers sanctuary, routine, and community (Imad, 2020a). When instruction and support services instantaneously shifted to an online environment, instructors and learners were forced to find ways to reimagine the social connections many depend on during times of crisis and uncertainty. Similarly, the crisis fed questions about the safety of personal sanctuaries, support communities, and compromised access to basic needs. The sustained duration of the initial crisis—the pandemic—naturally aligned with other crises: natural and man-made disasters, sociopolitical unrest, strained economies, rising human loss, and everyday human struggles.

During the LOEX 2021 session, participants were asked to consider four sample crises—industrial accidents, natural disasters, acts of terrorism and social unrest, and human loss—and identify potential or experienced needs of (a) learners and (b) instructors. Themes that emerged were the need for safe spaces, clear communication, emotional support, and a sense of community. Not reflected in participants’ responses were the presenters’ observation of learners’ struggles with self-advocacy and fulfilling physiological needs. Learners struggled with unsafe living conditions as housemates quarantined, compromising the health of loved ones, financial strain, and food, housing, transportation, and connectivity insecurities. Alongside the pandemic, Texas (the presenters’ home state) experienced an active hurricane season, multiple flooding events, complexities of Winter Storm Uri, and rising mental health issues (CDC, 2021).
Instructors can assist with connecting learners to resources, but the most immediate support they can provide is strategically fostering community within learning environments, creating opportunity for authentic learning, and bringing their own humanity to the instructional setting (Chick, 2013; Imad, 2020a, 2020b; Johnson, 2020).

**STRATEGIC INFORMATION LITERACY**

An information literate individual must be able to recognize when information is needed and be able to locate, evaluate, and effectively use that information (ALA, 1989). Information literacy (IL) provides a basis for lifelong learning. Learners at any level can benefit from building and practicing those skills and abilities (ALA, 1989; LaBrake, n.d). Instructors in the academic library use the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education to inform and craft their instruction. The ACRL Framework emphasizes the acquisition, evaluation, and application of information in the academic context, but it overlooks how those knowledge practices and skills transfer to everyday, real-world IL essential in building lifelong learners (ACRL, Appendix 1). In their own instruction, the presenters address this disparity by investigating and implementing related standard systems including the International Society for Technology Education (ISTE) Standards for Students and Educators and American Association of School Librarians (AASL) National School Library Standards. This coupling encourages creation of engaging authentic learning opportunities to create deeper meaning.

Learners already struggle to sift through the abundance of information (Jacoby, 1977; Zimmerman, 2018). When a crisis removes their sense of security and comfort, added mental strain further limits learners’ ability to filter and restricts their ability to make meaningful connections. Strategic IL instruction can make all the difference. Whether in a one-shot library instruction session or credit-bearing course, instructors are able to tailor their instruction, conversations, and assignments to reflect CT principles while providing strategic opportunities for students to investigate and practice IL in the real-world to which they can connect to the academic world.

**ACTIVE LEARNING**

Active learning techniques provide an opportunity for employing strategic IL instruction. Active learning (AL) is “generally defined as any instructional method that [actively] engages [learners] in the learning process” (Prince, 2004). Engaging learners in the doing and thinking about what they are doing (Brame, 2016) moves learners from passive information consumption to sustained meaning making. Strategically combining authentic scenarios into IL instruction using AL strategies strengthens that bond (Pearce, 2016). AL builds and reinforces content knowledge, promotes critical thinking, supports collaboration, provides frequent feedback, and improves learners’ interpersonal skills and self-confidence. When strategically integrating real-life scenarios into instruction with AL strategies, learners are engaged and appreciate the purposefulness of the instruction (Imad, 2020b; Prince, 2004; Ravitch, 2020).

The sting of the crisis can be lessened with strategically planned instruction. Folding the principles of CT with AL in IL instruction provides real-life relevance as learners tackle not easily solvable challenges with sustained investigation in a collaborative environment that includes critical thinking, learner choice, and regular feedback, culminating with the creation of an end product (Pearce, 2016). This combination satisfies learners’ basal needs for security and community while providing authentic relevance to the instructional material.

**Active Learning in Action**

In the LOEX 2021 session, the presenters provided two examples from their own instructional practices to demonstrate strategic IL during CT utilizing AL strategies. These are outlined below.

Learners’ need for community, collaboration, and manageable cognitive load in a hy-flex undergraduate course compelled the instructor in Figure 2 to develop a sustainable means for learners to engage in course materials. To develop community, protocols were established for open conversation and active collaboration. Learners chose research topics, established groups, voted on articles, established norms, and loaded their chosen article into a collaborative digital annotation tool. Each unit thereafter launched with instruction, discussion, and low-stakes active practice and feedback in the instruction session. Groups were then tasked with collaboratively dissecting and reverse-engineering their article, with each stage coinciding with a course unit. Group members’ activity in the tool demonstrated their interaction throughout the process and provided a means for instructor feedback.
In this second example, the instructor introduced the concept of the information search process in a socially distanced, hybrid undergraduate course. To connect to learners’ individual prior knowledge and validate past experiences, learners visualized and drew a research process used previously to complete an academic paper and its associated emotions. Visualizing encourages the brain to transform existing knowledge, an active process, into nonlinguistic representation of that information (McTighe & Silver, 2020). To create community between remote and in-person learners, drawings were uploaded to a shared Google Slide deck where they investigated and asked questions of others. This discussion encouraged learners to dual code—express information visually and linguistically—and primed the mind for a discussion of the iterativeness of the information search process (McTighe & Silver, 2020).
In both examples, the instructors anticipated learners’ needs, remained connected to current events, and sought to develop collaborative communities and authentic learning opportunities appropriate within their instructional scenarios.

Session participants reviewed four common AL strategies (Brame, 2016) to evaluate and defend contextual appropriateness. Notable responses included:

- Silence (being heard) is necessary after trauma.
- Learners have autonomy when given space to speak – or not speak.
- Multiple strategies build community and reduce the stress of participation.
- Collaborative documents ease cognitive load.

**Framing Future Instructional Practices**

As we emerge from the pandemic, it is important to recognize practices adopted and proven effective will frame future instructional practices. Instructors now have the mental capacity and skill to shift focus from a reactive state of CT to the proactive stance of trauma-informed pedagogy. Instructors should seek to:

- Remain cognizant of learners’ potential traumatic experiences while creating space to address socioemotional needs (Imad, 2020b; Learning for Justice, 2016);
- Construct opportunities and mechanisms for building community and collaboration ensuring learners’ voice and sense of agency (Imad, 2020b);
- Capitalize on skills learned or honed, such as self-regulation or technology integration, to improve instruction, but with the grace to accept imperfection; and
- Continue to set and communicate mutual high expectations fostering trust through transparency (Imad, 2020b).

**References**


LaBrake, M. (n.d.) *What is information literacy?* Berkeley College LibAnswers. https://chat.library.berkeleycollege.edu/faq/163368


