

July 2020

## No Perfect Syllabus for Distance Learning: DBT Skills for Deciding How to Teach Throughout Uncertainty

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### Recommended Citation

Shea, L. (2020). No Perfect Syllabus for Distance Learning: DBT Skills for Deciding How to Teach Throughout Uncertainty. *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences*, 7 (1). Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.merrimack.edu/phs/vol7/iss1/10>

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 Pandemic presents a unique set of challenges as we work to continue teaching and learning in the midst of a shared crisis. The processes of sharing and acquiring knowledge that define pedagogical practice, though, is so much more than the sum of the “whats” and “hows” of teaching practice. As we consider how best to remain rooted to pedagogy within the confines created by the Corona Virus, the fusion of present-focused awareness and dialectical theory that is central to Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) provides a framework through which to respond to uncontrollable circumstances with both acceptance and change. The core DBT skills (Mindfulness, Distress Tolerance, Emotion Regulation, Interpersonal Effectiveness, and Walking the Middle Path) provide tools with which to maintain best-practice teaching expectations while also making room for the impact of a crisis on both teaching and learning. Remaining flexibly rooted in pedagogy allows instructors to extend their best practices outside of typical learning environments and to consider how best to support students and selves in continued learning and growth throughout trial and uncertainty.

### Keywords

DBT, Pedagogy

## Pedagogy and the Human Sciences

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Volume 7  
Issue 1 *Teaching During Coronavirus Pandemic*

Article 10

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## **No Perfect Syllabus for Distance Learning: DBT Skills for Deciding How to Teach Throughout Uncertainty**

COVID-19 has come almost exactly at the midpoint of my (planned) time as a student in a Clinical Psychology PhD program. As a student in such a program, I spend a lot of time teaching and even more time learning. My classroom learning supplements my clinical training at an adolescent inpatient unit and my CrossFit coaching supplements my income. In each of these roles, the switch to distance teaching and learning has left me wondering what the most important aspects of each of these things really are. Teaching is often understood as being a composition of “whats” and “hows”-- the ways in which learning spaces are set up, lessons are structured, and progress is assessed (Smith, 2018). Unsurprisingly, these spaces are regularly the central focus of teaching practice, as they are the environments that instructors have created and cultivated for students to come together to learn new concepts and to consider the ways in which new knowledge might be applied to their lives. The COVID-19 Pandemic presents a unique kind of challenge to the learning process as it removes both learners and instructors from the spaces in which knowledge acquisition is traditionally operationalized. At the same time, though, the pandemic highlights all of the ways in which both teaching and learning are so much more than the sum of their “whats” and “hows.”

As a training clinician working with suicidal adolescents, I spend a lot of time teaching and learning about Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). In this uncertain time, dialectics have felt particularly powerful and meaningful for me as I shift to teaching, coaching, and learning at home and answer questions for myself about how this can and cannot happen. In my own graduate courses, I have noticed a pull either to try as hard as possible to keep course structure and content as close to the original syllabus as possible or to move completely away from the plan detailed in the syllabus. It seems that the former strategy is informed by a desire to provide a sense of normality and to honor the importance of the course content and the time of the students enrolled in the course. The latter strategy seems to reflect an effort to name and acknowledge the reality that the pandemic has created circumstances under which students cannot be expected to learn in the same ways. As a student who frequently finds myself vacillating between feelings of gratitude and competence and those of despair and self-doubt while in quarantine, I wonder how we might best make space for both strategies, acknowledging that neither are right and that both are.

Dialectical theory has a rich philosophical history. Dialectics have been used to make sense of our human experience in different ways by scholars ranging from Plato and Aristotle to Kant, Hegel, and Marx (Rescher, 2007;

Weverene, 1969; 2011, Warren, 2008). Hegel in particular prioritizes dialectics in his consideration of the human experience (Stirling, 1898). In a move away from Kant's logic of reasoning and toward a logic of being, Hegel asserts that change is the only constant in the human experience. This assertion has felt particularly relevant for me in my current context of teaching and learning as I have grappled to think about how I will continue to do both in these unexpected circumstances while also remembering that my success thus far in higher education has meant changing expectations, strategies, schedules, and relationship dynamics every few months. Each new semester in higher education brings different students and instructors into different courses and calls for new strategies to maintain a work/life balance for everyone involved in these learning spaces.

If, like the constant flow of one semester into the next, human experience is always something that happens through the changing of one thing into another, all experience must be a matter of opposites. In his search to answer the question of whether this relationship of opposites could be understood through logic, Hegel arrived at dialectics (Patterson, 2017). If change is what defines human experience, then no version of reality is final, nor is it ever the right one. When our human experiences and observations are pushed to the point of contradiction, a higher truth, one that embraces both sides of the contradiction, can be realized (Rescher, 2007). We are always making choices in response to our environment and our environment, in turn, is changed by our choices. One semester is never the same as another because each brings its own unique combination of learners, socio-political contexts and historical events—each of which are influencing and being influenced by those teaching within these unique set of circumstances.

If human consciousness is constructed by moving between and integrating opposed realities, then absolute truth exists only in a whole that can never be fully observed. Truth and error, then, are both always only partial. While this means that no semester can ever be perfect, no matter how ideal the teaching circumstances, it also means that no set of circumstances can remove value from teaching. In Hegel's estimation, disorder is simply another way of ordering. The distress from disorder lies not in the fact that it is inherently wrong, but in that it defies our expectations (Patterson, 2017). Rejection of a right or wrong way to order things means that thinking has the potential to be as fluid as are our circumstances (Rescher, 2007). Fluidity in thinking, it seems, frees us from the responsibility of teaching in the "right" ways or learning the "right" content. Instead, we might best use this energy to consider our relationship to our experience, validate how challenging it is to have an experience that is so different from what we expected, remind ourselves that we have managed changes in our experience many times before, and make choices about who we want to be within the context in which we find ourselves.

Hegel centralizes the term *aufheben* in his explanation of the process of loss inherent in our efforts to preserve our reality and our experience (Birchall, 1981; Patterson, 2017). As we expand in response to our experience, in order to honor, integrate, and safeguard new knowledge, parts of these experiences are unavoidably lost in the process of development. As students move through their programs and instructors move from teaching one course to the next, new learning can only be integrated by giving up parts of past learning experiences. In my Clinical Psychology PhD program, for instance, being able to apply academic content to clinical settings has meant reducing academic rigor as more time and energy is dedicated to clinical training. In order to begin really applying the concepts I have worked hard to learn in the classroom, I had to move away from the classroom space and apply this learning in less-than-perfect ways in real contexts. Moving forward, for any student, requires a kind of surrender; a willingness to let go of some parts of reality and experience, to make space for new learning and development. The aspects of the learning experience that need to be given up in a shift to distance learning, while unprecedentedly challenging, might be less different from our past experiences of development than we imagine.

As we are challenged to expand our skill sets to continue learning and teaching in these unexpected set of circumstances, we are faced with a particularly challenging set of dialectics. Classroom learning has at the same time, been halted, and must continue. Students have been asked to face the reality that life as they know it is radically different while still being asked to meet the standards set before this change occurred. Instructors have been asked to continue their teaching both despite and because of the uncertainty their institutions and their students are facing. As everyone works to adjust to “new normals,” we are left to grapple with the ways in which the pain and uncertainty of the present circumstances limit capacities to teach and to learn while also acknowledging that this is the very reason that new learning must occur. We are faced with the reality that while we have no control over the varied environments to which the process of learning is now confined, these limitations are exactly the reason that creative strategies for teaching and learning are needed.

The closing of institutions does not separate instructors from their call to teach because education extends far beyond the confines of teaching spaces. Learning spaces are so often the central focus of educational practice, not because they are the only spaces in which learning can occur but because they are unique reflections of how learning happens. Pedagogy, though, is so much more than the sum of its parts. It is not simply a compilation of expectations and practices but an expression of beliefs about how minds work and how learning can be cultivated in support of these minds (Bruner 1996; Smith 2015, 2020). Pedagogy grounds teaching to a larger set of values and beliefs that allow instructors to honor their

commitment to educate across different semesters and different groups of students.

Grounding teaching practice in pedagogy calls for a unique balance of acceptance and change when faced with indefinite closing of institutions. The Corona Virus presents obstacles and limits to effective pedagogy implementation in ways that are very real and that have enormous impact and consequence. Students have had to leave their school community and travel to places across the globe, with little warning, and have had to adjust to learning within new and varied environments. Instructors are faced with unanswerable questions about their futures and their livelihoods and with the task of managing a work/life balance when the boundary between the two has been completely erased. Meaningful pedagogy, though, calls for reflection, commitment, and change. These are the processes through which new information is learned and implemented (Smith 2012, 2019). These are also the same processes that allow for perseverance in new learning, even in the most challenging and uncertain of circumstances.

Accepting things as they are is a key component of Mindfulness. The practice of bringing awareness intentionally to the present moment and noticing thoughts, feelings, and experiences as they arise provides a framework through which we can begin to notice things as they are instead of as how we think they should be (Hahn, 1991). Intentionally bringing awareness to our experience allows us to name the pain and challenge inherent in the shift to distance learning while also noticing that adjusting to new schedules and circumstances is something that we have done many times before.

Based in a rich Buddhist tradition, mindfulness is a strategy designed in response to Siddhartha Gautama's revelation that our experience of life depends largely on our state of mind (Goldenberg, 1882). In the tradition of Zen Buddhism, meditation and mindfulness are used as tools through which to see life more clearly. As we notice our states of mind, we increase our capacity to notice these states as they arise and to change them. In this way, liberation from the inevitability of human suffering is made possible through working on the mind (Burk, 2017; Hahn, 1999).

The Zen tradition uses the term *Dukkha* to talk about suffering in a way that feels particularly meaningful in the midst of a shared global crisis. This term for suffering refers not only to the kind of pain or hardship we associate with the English term but expands to include feelings of unease or dissatisfaction (Rāhula 1974, Burk, 2017). We often maintain our own unhappiness, these teaching suggest, through a commitment to our beliefs that things are different than they should be. In a time when many of us are mindful of the fact that the impact of the Corona Virus is, without a doubt, differential across different contexts and experiences, we may feel pulled to invalidate our own distress because of how

much less our suffering is in comparison to others. Though maintaining perspective is an important part of the process of deciding who to be throughout a crisis, refusal to acknowledge and confront our sense that things are not as they should be keeps us from making choices about how to respond to our circumstances. Moreover, denying our personal suffering is likely to keep us preoccupied with our own experience in a way that makes it impossible to bring compassion, or perhaps some redistribution of resources, to the suffering of others.

Zen and Dialectical Philosophies are both central tenets of Marsha Linehan's (1987a, 1987b) model of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). This model of treatment has proven particularly powerful for suicidal adolescents as it makes space both for the immense pain in their experience and for the possibility of living in ways that are less painful (Linehan 1987a, 1987b; Miller et al., 2006). In my search to find creative ways to continue teaching these skills to adolescents on an inpatient unit that I cannot currently physically access, dialectical philosophy has been particularly important to my own learning process. The centrality of both mindfulness and dialectics in DBT has given me some tools to both name the pain in being removed from the spaces and the people that have characterized my teaching and to move forward with choices around how to continue this teaching at a distance. It seems that this same framework is well-suited to create new strategies for effective distance teaching and learning. Rather than choosing between keeping syllabi and course expectations as normal as possible or abandoning this structure in order to validate our current state of crisis, the DBT model provides tools to consider how both strategies might be included in a shift to distance learning. In this way, seemingly opposed responses to the shift can be used in combination, with each challenging and pushing the other in order to arrive at a higher truth—a teaching strategy that truly honors its new context.

As we work to navigate the task of shifting teaching practices to fit the unexpected set of circumstances carved out by the Corona Virus, DBT's primary assumption, that each of us is doing the best that we can, and that people want to improve, feels particularly relevant (Miller et al., 2006; Robins, 2002). Instructors and learners are all struggling to manage their abrupt new realities and needing strategies to continue moving forward within these "new normals." Students are asked to continue meeting their milestones and deadlines while moving out of their learning communities and into varied settings and circumstances. Instructors are asked to continue building on their best practices and to find innovative and creative ways to facilitate learning while they manage their own emotional reactions to the weight of a global crisis.

As instructors who have been removed from their teaching spaces strive to do the best they can, and to look for ways to do better, another assumption of DBT

feels particularly relevant. People may not have caused all of their problems, but they need to solve them anyway. A DBT metaphor I use frequently with adolescents who feel frustrated by the circumstances beyond their control that have left them feeling trapped in a system of mandated care, is of a person walking along a riverbank who is pushed into the river by a passerby. This person certainly did nothing to cause this problem of being stuck in the river and yet they are unquestionably responsible for getting themselves out (Miller et al., 2006). If the Corona Virus can be understood as a societal river in which we have all unwittingly found ourselves, the charge is the same. As we work to determine how to manage the impact of the Corona Virus on teaching and learning, DBT's use of dialectical thinking and present-focused awareness provides a framework through which to consider how we might best manage these problems that, while outside of our control, are ours to solve.

### **Mindfulness**

Pedagogy is the fusion of theory and practice; the framework within which decisions about teaching practices are made (Smith 2012, 2018). As we work to make decisions that honor a commitment to pedagogy within a completely new context, mindfulness can help to bring attention to what this new context is, and what choices it includes. Mindfulness asks us to bring nonjudgmental awareness to the present moment as we work to intentionally focus our attention (Rathus & Miller, 2014). The function of mindfulness skills to regulate attention, bring awareness to the body, and change perspective of the self, have shown to facilitate improvement in abilities to direct attention and to manage impulsivity (Hölzel et al, 2011; Feliu, 2014). In practicing mindfulness, we build our ability to notice the choices that we have in any given moment as we bring ourselves fully to what is happening in the here and now (Hahn, 1991).

Present-focused awareness allows us to slow down and notice the things happening around and inside of us (Miller et al., 2006). In this way, we can observe what is happening without judgment and make choices about how to proceed. I might, for instance, choose to coach CrossFit classes on Zoom that make use of household objects. This workout, of course, will be less effective than one that I could facilitate in a gym full of equipment. At the same time, though, this point of connection might be a much more effective way of keeping people connected and motivated than asking that they work out alone until we are back in a preferred teaching setting would be. In much the same way, present focused awareness allows for a consideration of syllabi within their current context. It challenges our assumptions that syllabi are either good or bad in a shift to distance learning. Instead of determining whether the structure presented in a syllabus is right or wrong, this energy can be redirected toward considering the

function of syllabus content and determining which aspects can be operationalized within our current limitations.

### **Distress Tolerance**

Distress tolerance is our ability to endure difficult situations and withstand emotional pain when problems cannot be solved right away. Tolerating distress increases our capacity to engage in short term solutions that allow for different ways of interacting with suffering. While these new strategies will not solve our core problem, they can allow us to manage the resulting pain without making problems worse (Linehan, 1993; Rathus & Miller, 2014). In the context of teaching and learning during a pandemic, distress tolerance might best be understood as confidence in the ability to remain rooted in pedagogy while managing the complicated emotional and logistical barriers present.

Naming our distress allows for us to evaluate the pros and cons of acting on the impulses that arise in response. My distress around being asked to facilitate a DBT skills group remotely, knowing that this will be of much less benefit to the adolescent group members than in-person facilitation, for instance, might pull me to remove myself from the process of group facilitation entirely. My impulses might suggest that because I cannot effectively lead a group without being physically in the space, that I should re-focus my efforts on research or projects where I can be more assured of my own potential for success. In naming my distress, though, I can choose to accept the limitations of teaching from afar, and perhaps begin to notice the value of demonstrating a commitment to adolescents who have a history of being invalidated, even if the product I have to offer them is less than perfect. Naming distress allows for our perspective to broaden, so that we can consider not only the outcomes of choices about how to teach but also the ways in which these choices have the power to influence learners, both inside and outside of specific course content.

### **Emotion Regulation:**

Pedagogy is deliberate and hopeful. It calls for a commitment to the core values of learning and knowledge across circumstances and throughout challenges (Smith, 2015, 2020). Emotion regulation strengthens our capacity to remain grounded in this commitment as we reduce our emotional vulnerability and increase our ability to recover more quickly from emotional reactions. Bringing awareness to emotional reactions as they arise builds our capacity to make choices that consider and include our emotions rather than allowing these emotions to make decisions on their own.

Knowing what our emotions do for us can increase access to a powerful aspect of decisions making processes during a crisis. Emotions are not good or bad. They give us information, help us to connect with others, and to motivate us for action. The anxiety we feel over our job security as teaching institutions remain closed, for instance, might bring our attention to important choices to be made around ensuring our ability to continue caring for ourselves and our families. Considering the function of these messages and how they serve us in the present moment, allows us to notice emotions as they arise and make choices that include these responses rather than react to them. Fear for my job stability, for instance, might mean that I choose to prepare to spend time looking for other opportunities over the summer rather than dividing my attention between my students and a potential job search for the remainder of the semester.

Noticing our emotions as they come up also increases our ability to prepare for challenging moments. Living in the midst of a pandemic brings with it a rollercoaster of emotion. Using down-time to prepare for ways to care for ourselves in challenging moments builds capacity to allow such moments to crash over us without fear that we will be swept away. As I choose to accept that I have no way of currently knowing whether or not my institution will re-open in the fall, I might decide to engage in the aspects of teaching that I enjoy and that make me feel capable and in control. In this way, I can build my sense of competency and notice the positive in my experience as I give myself permission to redirect attention from the circumstances outside of my control for the time being.

### **Interpersonal Effectiveness**

Teaching is a process of considering people's experiences, making space for their feelings and attending to their needs in a way that allows for new knowledge to be considered and applied (Smith, 2015). Ongoing commitment to meaningful pedagogy in ever-changing circumstances requires a consideration of the goals and values of instructors in combination with the needs and wants of learners. Interpersonal Effectiveness skills increase our ability to build and maintain positive relationships. In a context where we can no longer rely on in-person interactions, building these skills increases the ability to be flexible and to negotiate thoughtfully while remaining committed to the core components of pedagogy.

Maintaining relationships in challenging and uncertain circumstances means being gentle with ourselves and others. Using humor and compassion allows us to prioritize our own needs while making space for the difficulties and circumstances of others. We do not need to apologize for who we are and we certainly should not apologize for our commitment to remaining grounded in our pedagogy. We might, though, find ways to listen to students who are struggling

with a transition to remote learning and re-consider which aspects of a syllabus are non-negotiable and which have room to be changed. We might take some time to reflect on which parts of our teaching practice are reflections of our pedagogical values and which are our attempts to make things as we think they should be. We might also spend a few moments acknowledging how challenging it is for each of us to be learning things that we did not expect to need to know.

### **Walking the Middle Path**

Meaningful pedagogy can expand and change to fit circumstances as they arise. It provides a framework to facilitate effective learning across contexts and experiences. Walking the Middle Path means opening up our thinking in much the same way. As we make space for the reality that things are always changing and that meaning and truth evolve within these changes, our ability to remain both flexible and tied to our underlying framework increases.

Increasing dialectical thinking makes more space to honor the truth in each of our experiences and challenges. Validation communicates that thoughts, feelings, and actions make sense in their context. In validating ourselves and others we can point out and acknowledge the truths in each of our circumstances and give these truths the compassion that they deserve. This does not mean that we agree with what is happening, it simply allows us to witness and value emotions and reactions as they arise.

### **Deciding How to Teach Through Uncertainty**

Whether they be skills groups, fitness classes, or course lectures, producing content that is good enough does not mean that we do not wish it could be better. Choosing to do the best that we can in a given moment does not compromise our ability to continue searching for creative ways to make things better within the confines of our circumstances. Letting go of our expectations of how things should be does not mean that we are giving up on our commitments to our learners but rather that we are giving ourselves permission to find ways to uphold these commitments that do not require a control over our environment. Letting go of our expectations about the right ways to teach opens up our capacity to engage in our own new learning and to do so in ways that are in order with our experiences as we are currently living in them.

Working to provide and engage with structure and meaningful content in an environment of constant stress and uncertainty is hard. At the same time, it is incredibly important. Learning opportunities that are flexibly tied to pedagogy are a gift to learners--a chance for consistency and progress within a challenging new normal. They are also a gift to educators, a chance to continue building our

competency and to remain rooted to our commitments and values as we give ourselves permission to redirect our effort away from aspects of our circumstance that are beyond our control. Being present for learners and giving ourselves permission to continue learning throughout crisis matters in ways that extend far beyond our current context. Dialectically speaking, Corona Virus is keeping instructors from their learning spaces and nothing can ever keep instructors from teaching and from learning.

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