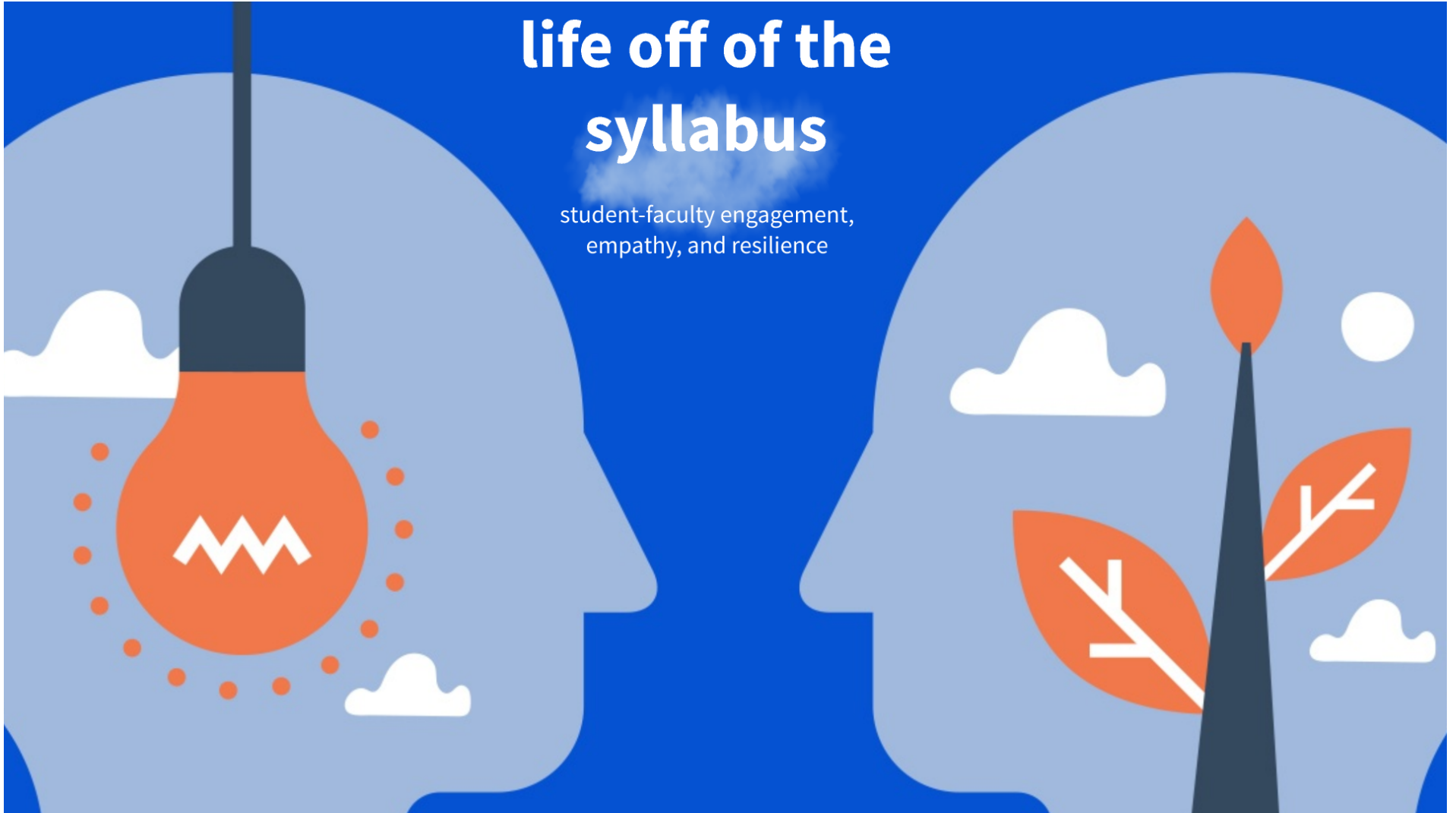


# life off of the syllabus

student-faculty engagement,  
empathy, and resilience





*“good teachers ...are able to weave a complex web of connections between themselves, their subjects, and their students, so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves...the connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts—meaning heart in its ancient sense, the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self.”*

*parker palmer, the courage to teach (p. 11)*

# disclaimer



- i am a sociologist
  - social relationships
  - social construction of reality
  - knowing and learning and interactive processes
- i do not claim to know the psychology or neuroscience
- i have no formal training in teaching
- i care about the *whole life* of my students



# what are informal interactions?

- actions that happen outside of the formal confines of the class period or other academic oriented / center activities
- social – department student organizations, formal associations
- situational – before and after class
- happenstance – in the community
- planned and cultivated – specific programming, volunteering, cultural and education events



# what does the research say?

- informal student-faculty relationships account for higher levels of academic performance, intellectual development, and personal development (pascarella & terenzini, 1978; woodside, wong, & weist, 1999)
- nonclassroom interactions have an influence on students' motivation for academic achievement (pascarella, terenzini, & hibbel, 1978)
- develop the academic self-concept of students, grows student motivation, engagement, and actively involved in the learning process (komarraju, et. al 2010)
- faculty bridge the student and the institution, interactions contribute to intellectual and social congruence and persistence (cox & orehovec, 2007; tinto, 1993)



# what does the research say?

- students report high levels of engagement and learning at schools where faculty members interacted more often with students (umbach & wawrzynski, 2005)
- the quality of faculty contact – including interest in personal growth, career goals, and students’ family and social relationships – embolden student persistence and motivation (trollian, et. al 2016)



# what does the research say?

- students from marginalized backgrounds (first generation students, racial and ethnic minorities, women, gender and sexually diverse students, student disability community, low-socioeconomic backgrounds) benefit more from informal interactions (cho & auger, 2013)
- substantive interactions boost academic outcomes like knowledge acquisition and skill development; informal interactions promote engagement, persistence, and progress (cox, et. al 2010; meyers, et. al, 2019)



# why does this matter?

*“...our study suggests that virtually every type of interaction between faculty members and students can have positive effects. while our findings confirm the value of functional interaction, they also indicate that incidental contacts, personal interactions, and mentoring can be meaningful to students. even the most fleeting out-of-class interactions with faculty members (i.e. incidental contact) can help students overcome professional distance implicit in a classroom setting. **moreover, incidental contact, though often unintentional and superficial, can serve as a stepping stone to more substantial interactions later.**”*

bradley e. cox & elizabeth orehovec, (2007, pp. 359-60)



# verstehen



- empathic understanding of human behavior.
  - the "interpretive or participatory" examination of social phenomena
  - understanding the meaning of action from the actor's point of view.
- entering into the shoes of the other, and adopting this stance requires
- treating the other as a subject, rather than an object
- implies that unlike objects in the natural world humans are not the passive product of the pulls and pushes of external forces
  - individuals are seen to create the world by organizing their own understanding of it and giving it meaning



# contact, mindsets, and empathy

- concerted contact → exposure to others' perspectives
- concerted exposure → understanding others' experiences
- concerted understanding of others → empathy mindset
- “you first need to show genuine interest in them, listen to what they have to say, and then maybe after a while find something to hold on to.” (zaki 2019, pp. 70-1)



# what about faculty outcomes?

- *verstehen and empathy*
- internal empathy: faculty can come to know the internal state of their students and be motivated to respond with care (batson, 2009)
- social empathy: faculty can understand students by perceiving and experiencing their lived situations and develop an insight into structural, social, and personal conditions, inequalities, and disparities impact their ability to engage with coursework (segal, 2011; meyers, et. al, 2019)



*“remember what you were like at 18 or 19 or 20 years old. then remember what it was like to have a powerful emotional experience at that age, especially a negative or distracting one...so the best advice i can offer here, even in small teaching terms, would be this: whenever you are tempted to come down hard on a student for any reason whatsoever, take a couple of minutes to speculate on the possibility that something in the background of that student’s life has triggered emotions that are interfering with their motivation or their learning.”*

james lang (2016, p. 189)



# ‘universal learning’ for faculty

- students are people, too, with lives and experiences that impact who they are in class and their ability to engage fully with the material.
- informal interactions with any student helps appreciate the potential experiences of *all* students:
  - positive
  - authentic
  - well-intentioned



*“teaching from a place of radical hope means that we believe every one of our students can succeed in accomplishing what our courses ask of them, and that we commit to acting on that belief. for some of our students, an instructor who actually believes they can not only pass but do well is a novel occurrence, and we shouldn’t underestimate the power that being an advocate for our students holds. to be an advocate for student learning, i think we need to be advocates for both students and learning.”*

kevin m. gannon (2020, p. 36).

# teacher empathy



- the degree to which instructors:
  - work to deeply understand students' personal and social situations
  - feel caring and concern in response to students' positive and negative emotions
  - communicate through their caring and understanding to students through their behavior

(kaufman and schipper 2018; meyers, et al. 2019)

# teacher empathy



- cognitive
  - taking the students' perspectives / understanding situations
- affective
  - similar, attributable emotions
    - i.e. student anxiety → care and compassion for a negative emotion
- behavioral
  - show compassion
  - encourage and support
  - foster a growth mindset

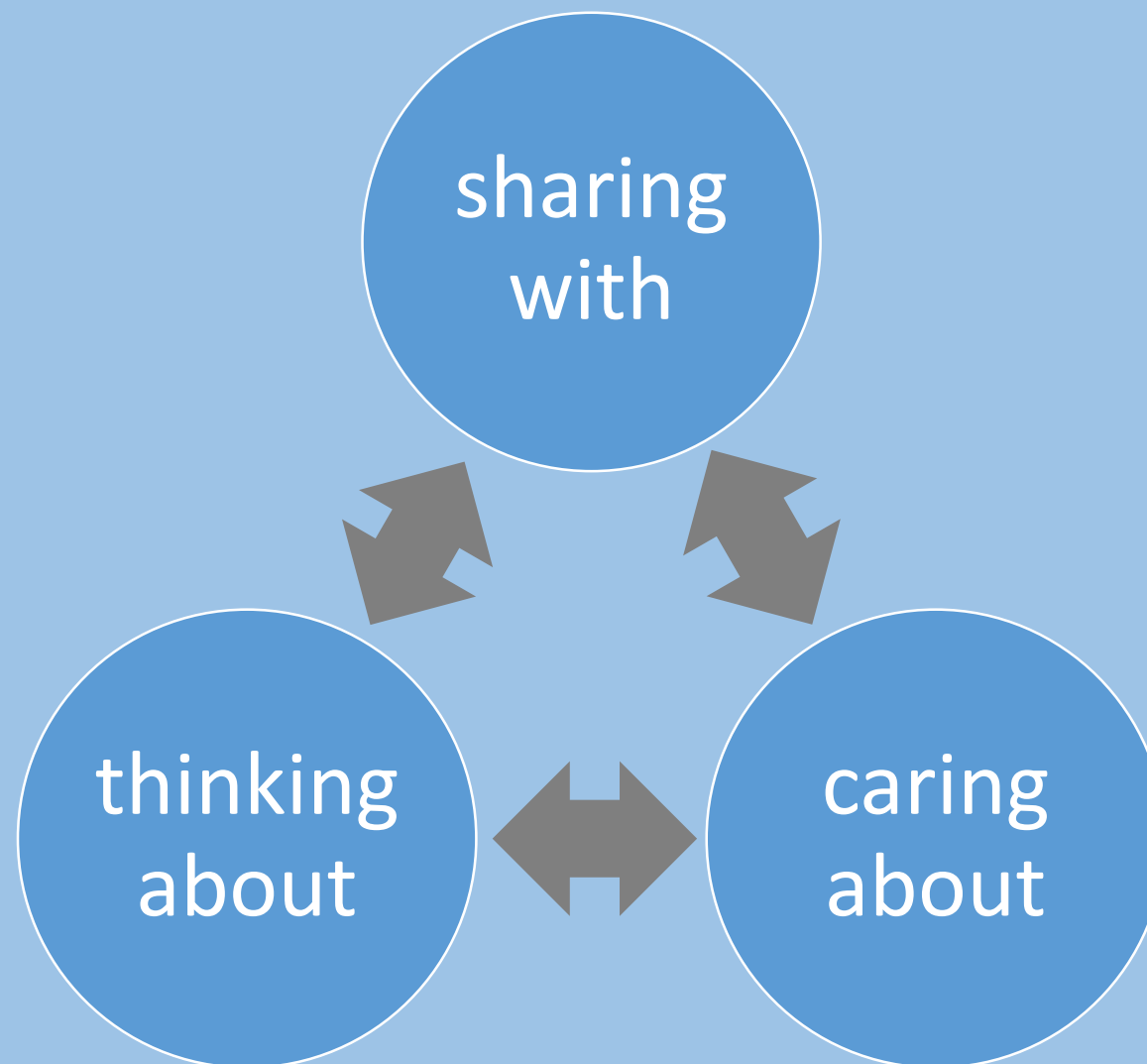


# teacher empathy



- understanding students' contexts
  - social: first generation status; employment; parenting; co-curricular activities;
  - emotional health: anxiety; mental health;
  - physical health
- understanding professor / student dynamics
  - implicit biases
  - stereotype threat
  - belonging uncertainty

# a model of empathy (zaki 2019)



# strategies



- small learning-inspired
  - *show up early to class*
  - *small talk is productive talk to build rapport*
  - *promote growth and compassion*
- change your practices
  - *consider alternative places for office hours*
  - *eat lunch in public spaces on campus*
  - *take a walk*

# strategies



- get involved
  - *advise student organizations*
  - *join social activities on campus*
  - *volunteer*
- know who you are
  - *what are you comfortable doing?*
  - *how does would this intersect with your teaching/faculty philosophy*
  - *know your limits, but avoid building walls*



# and then, a pandemic

- empathy, care, and compassion are needed more than ever

*“teaching must be an act of imagination, hope, and possibility. education must be a practice done with hearts as much as heads, with hands as much as books. care has to be at the center of this work.”*

jesse stommel, chris friend, and sean Michael morris (2020,  
*introduction*)

- teaching in higher ed podcast, episode 320 :
  - “how to be together in learning online”

<https://teachinginhighered.com/podcast/how-to-be-together-in-learning-online/#transcriptcontainer>

# check in!



- harvard university making caring common project
- check-in survey for student, or anyone
- *how are you doing today?*
- *<https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-educators/covid-check-in-survey>*

# physically distanced, socially connected



- virtual coffee hours
- virtual game night
- volunteer activities
- campus-based programming (eiu reads, student organizations, residence life programs)
- social media scavenger hunts (#hashtag searches, scholar searches)
- hobby chats (create channels in teams, for example, and group people based on interests)

# conclusion: resilience and empathy



- students who have strong social supports and feel connected campus exude higher levels of resilience – the ability to persevere in the face of adversities (pidgeon, et. al 2014).
- faculty can play a unique role in building this resilience:
  - empathy → empower resilience in struggling students
- faculty can benefit from an empathetic relationship with their students
  - student resilience → empower resilience in our teaching



# 7 ways to respond to students with empathy

1. follow the 'platinum rule', not the 'golden rule'  
*treat students the way **they** want to be treated*
2. ask open-ended questions  
*don't assume you know how the student is feeling*
3. set aside your own reaction  
*focus on understanding the student's experience*
4. use 'I' statements (not 'you' statements)  
*state 'I feel' or 'I'm concerned'*
5. actively listen to what the student is saying  
*full attention is reciprocal*
6. don't jump into 'fix it' mode  
*sometimes students just want to be heard or need a safe space*
7. validate students' feelings  
*let students know they have the right to feel the way they feel*