

Fostering Posttraumatic Growth in College Classrooms During COVID-19

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Abstract: So much has changed. Aside from losing social connections, academic support structures, and enrichment opportunities, students face new anxieties about health, loved ones, and financial security within an uncertain economy. The sudden loss of control and unanswered questions about the future may leave many feeling helpless, fearful, angry, or grieving. In the middle of this global crisis, do classroom learning and traditional curricula suddenly feel less relevant? With attention on more salient problems and a complexity of emotions students can't begin to process, where will the motivation and focus to learn come from? How can faculty account for this in their teaching? Feeling at a loss, I was delighted when a former student reached out to discuss these topics. Through a series of individual personal reflections and conversations, we explored ways of interpreting this adversity and ultimately cocreated meaning in ways we hope will benefit both students and faculty, whether future learning is conducted virtually or face-to-face. We found great value in illustrating our experiences using a well-known conceptualization of posttraumatic growth, which entails positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle to make sense of a highly challenging life circumstance—one such as the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19)—which can shatter our worldview, shake us from our ordinary perceptions, and force us to rebuild ourselves and find deeper meaning. Specifically, we discussed what choices students have in responding to the current situation and how faculty can support positive growth choices; what posttraumatic growth might look like during the COVID-19 pandemic; what deliberative cognitive exploration is, how it can foster growth, and how faculty can encourage it in their classrooms; and what types of growth “outcomes” might not only give us purpose and meaning in this time but also build resilience, and perhaps make us even better than before.

Keywords: posttraumatic growth, PTG, PTSD, adversarial growth, transformative growth, COVID-19, deliberative cognitive exploration, resilience, pandemic teaching.

“The test of someone’s true character occurs during the hard times, not the easy ones.”

—Unknown

As a university lecturer on a 10-month contract, I’m in a bubble of sorts and feel fortunate that my career, health, and financial situation were not negatively impacted by the start of the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and economic shutdown. However, I immediately felt concern for family, friends, and strangers who I knew would inevitably face hardships of one sort or another. I was also worried for my students, predominantly highly motivated, career-oriented sophomores in our business school. A primary goal of my course is to prepare students for recruiting, interviewing, and thriving in their first internships. I worried not only about the students who might struggle with uncertain home circumstances, the sudden loss of their peer community, and the transition to online learning, but also about the many students who had begun planning their

future careers in high school and had mapped out step-by-step the coursework, extracurricular involvement, and internships they felt they needed to get the job of their dreams. I'd witnessed firsthand their goal intensity in the classroom and their unwillingness to veer from their high standards and expectations.

Suddenly, I saw their tenacity and singular drive as a potential Achilles heel in handling the changes that COVID-19 would bring about and was concerned about how they would cope with canceled internships and study abroad opportunities. Many were striving for a high-paying job at a Big Four firm but now were entering an uncertain economy that might have long-lasting impacts on their ability to become financially stable. When I thought of the political and social unrest colliding with COVID-19, I was overwhelmed with gratitude for this time of my life and all of the privileges I've been afforded. I couldn't imagine how I would have coped with all of these events and uncertainty on a global and economic scale when I was 20.

Not yet having wrapped my own mind around everything, I wasn't sure how to communicate with my students about the issues. I tried my best to finish the spring semester online with as much "normalcy" and positivity as possible, hoping that students would value that at the time. I was afraid of sounding "alarmist" and thought perhaps calmness and upholding the status quo would give them some predictability and hope. However, was I merely giving them a *false sense* of predictability and hope? I wasn't sure how my curriculum should change in the fall, but I didn't want to keep my head in the sand and avoid difficult conversations with students simply because I would be uncomfortable with the emotions they stirred. I wanted to have a strategy of some sort that might help students "process" their fears in healthy and productive ways. A part of me was already worried what the classroom vibe would be like months later and whether I would be able to navigate it to the students' benefit. Would things still feel so messy? Somehow ignoring the messiness felt inauthentic.

Then, out of the blue, a former student of mine reached out to me and we met up on Zoom. I wasn't sure what to expect until she passionately began describing all the ways in which this experience had changed her perspective on things. Katherine expressed feeling deeply humbled and aware of how much privilege she had growing up. She talked about how she'd suddenly realized she couldn't control everything. She spoke about gratitude for her parents and how she was looking for ways to volunteer and learn new skills while in lockdown. We spoke for over an hour, and in the midst of feeling her world upended, Katherine could also sense herself growing. And, upon perceiving this change inside herself, she felt excited and inspired. We agreed to talk again in a week.

That was certainly not the conversation I'd expected to have. It reminded me of a concept I'd learned in an applied positive psychology certification program called posttraumatic growth (PTG), sometimes referred to as transformational growth or adversarial growth. The concept grew from researchers and practitioners who noticed that not everyone who suffers from a traumatic event will develop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Some individuals experience positive changes following trauma. PTG should be distinguished from resilience—the ability to go on with life after hardship and adversity—as it results in a transformation in our fundamental understanding of the world that makes us better problem solvers and more resistant to shocks in the future.

I was curious as to whether the COVID-19 pandemic would qualify as a traumatic event and wondered what factors led to one outcome (PTSD) or the other (PTG). I found this has been a rich field of study for a few decades.

What Is Trauma?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, any event that causes a lot of stress—marked by a sense of horror, helplessness, serious injury, or the threat of serious injury or death—

can be traumatic (n.d). A collective trauma is a traumatic psychological effect shared by a group of people or an entire society that stirs up collective sentiment and often results in changes to culture and mass actions. Updegraff, Silver, and Holman (2008) found collective trauma experienced in the United States following the September 11, 2001 attacks. A broader definition of trauma is held by Jannoff-Bulman (1992), who claimed that people hold a personal narrative at their core that consists of fundamental assumptions about identify, safety, security, and the future and that trauma can occur whenever these assumptions are tested and “shattered.” Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004, 2013)⁴ defined trauma as those events that have a seismic impact on an individual’s “assumptive world.” Certainly, a global pandemic can challenge one’s assumptions about the world, sense of security, and how much control one has over one’s life.

What Causes Growth?

Fortunately, humans are naturally motivated toward psychological growth (Linley & Joseph, 2005) as defined by Ryff (1989). In particular, people participate in processes of self-acceptance, personal growth, autonomy achievement, finding purpose in life, environmental mastery, and positive relations with others.

Initially, processing a traumatic event is intrusive and unwelcome, as one’s assumptive world is shattered and one is required to reevaluate one’s core beliefs. Then in an attempt to resolve the dissonance, a person’s processing can become more deliberate and focused. Often, people attempt to garner meaning from the event, and with their basic schemas shattered, they must rebuild and modify them over time to reach coherence (Antonovsky, 1987; Jannoff-Bulman, 1992). Cognitive structures and coping mechanisms are rebuilt to be more resistant to shocks in the future. One’s life narrative becomes more complex, and there may be an increase in wisdom, along with well-being and adjustment.

Similarly, the Polish psychiatrist Kazimierz Dabrowski (1972) argued that “positive disintegration” can be a growth-fostering experience. After studying a number of people with high psychological development, Dabrowski concluded that healthy personality development often requires the disintegration of the personality structure, which can temporarily lead to psychological tension, self-doubt, anxiety, and depression. However, Dabrowski believed this process can lead to a deeper examination of what one could be and ultimately to higher levels of personality development. For instance, people may simultaneously feel vulnerable while also recognizing their own strength. Recognition of these paradoxes engages trauma survivors in dialectical thinking that is similar to that described in literature on wisdom (Baltes, Staudinger, Maercher, & Smith, 1995) and integrative complexity (Porter & Suedfeld, 1981).

Who Experiences Growth?

Interestingly, not everyone will experience PTG, because the growth does *not* actually occur as a direct result of the trauma itself. It is the individual’s deliberative cognitive and emotional struggle to make sense and meaning of the event that propels the individual to a higher level of functioning than what existed prior to the event (Linley & Joseph, 2004). Some individuals who do not actively process a stressful event—which resulted in a host of negative emotions and unpleasant physical reactions—can be at risk of developing psychiatric problems (Rubonis & Bickman, 1991), although it is not just the nonprocessors who may not experience growth. Those with high resilience skills, who are likely to bounce back quickly from setbacks, also may not experience positive growth. It is the individuals who endure some cognitive and emotional struggle during the crisis who are most

likely to grow. In sum, if people are high in coping capacities, they will be less challenged by the trauma and will (theoretically) experience less PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

The degree to which one engages in deliberative cognitive exploration and experiences PTG has also been found to vary by individual characteristics. Qualities such as a propensity toward feeling positive emotions and openness to feelings were correlated modestly with growth measured on Costa the Posttraumatic Growth Index created by Costa & McR (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) [PTGI from Costa & McCrae, 1992]. Schaefer and Moos (1992) developed a conceptual model to explain the determinants of stress-related growth. The variables are, in sequence: (a) the respondent's personal characteristics (e.g., gender, temperament, personality traits) and characteristics of the respondent's environment (e.g., social support, living conditions); (b) characteristics of the negative life event (e.g., stressfulness, duration, controllability); and (c) coping behavior, including cognitive redefinition or positive reinterpretation of the event, and acceptance, assuming that there are aspects of the event that cannot be changed.

Optimism might promote stress-related growth because of its relationship to adaptive coping strategies, such as problem-focused coping and seeking social support (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992; Scheier et al., 1989; Scheier, Weintraub, & Carver, 1986). Optimists may be better able to focus attention and resources on the most important matters and disengage from uncontrollable or unsolvable problems (Aspinwall, Richter, & Hoffman, 2001). Likewise, the degree to which individuals engage in self-disclosure about their emotions and about their perspective on their crisis, and how others respond to that self-disclosure, may also play a role in PTG. Others (if viewed as credible or if they are known to have experienced something similar) can offer perspectives on adversity that can be valued and integrated (Neimeyer, 2001). Therefore, social support from others can facilitate PTG when they provide "discussion of perspective, offering of beliefs, and the use of metaphor to explain experience. All of this is fertile ground for the revision of schemas that is essential to the experience of growth" (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999, p. 68).

Gender might also play a role in growth. In one study, women had higher Stress-Related Growth Scale scores than men (e.g., Brooks & Matson, 1982; Lehman et al., 1993; Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996; Wallerstein, 1986), which might have been due to differences in coping. L'Abate (1992) described how women are socialized to focus inward to acknowledge and experience their feelings. Perhaps this, L'Abate posed, or their heightened recognition of achieved personal changes facilitates their stress-related growth.

What Does Growth Look Like?

Learning about the many aspects of life that are out of one's control allows one to focus on what is within one's control and make meaning of the situation and one's decisions. But, more specifically, what form can this growth take? The processing of trauma can change one's sense of self, one's sense of relationships with others, and one's life philosophies (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Major domains of growth include greater appreciation of life and a changed sense of priorities; warmer, more intimate relationships with others; a greater sense of personal strength; recognition of new possibilities or paths for one's life; and increased wisdom and spiritual development (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Trauma can also bring a sense of humility via the recognition that one cannot control everything in one's life, that one is not as invincible as one may believe (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014). PTG can be connected to significant development of wisdom and of the individual's life narrative. There will be a "before and an after" the COVID-19 pandemic, and the struggle to deal with the event can lead to PTG *and* a revised life story (McAdams, 1993).

Schaefer and Moos (1992) reviewed the literature on life crises and personal growth and outlined three major types of stress-related positive outcomes: (a) enhanced social resources (e.g.,

better relationships with friends); (b) enhanced personal resources (e.g., better self-concept); and (c) new or improved coping skills (e.g., better problem-solving ability). People who have faced major challenges in their lives may also develop “the ability to balance reflection and action, weigh the known and unknowns of life, be better able to accept some of the paradoxes of life, and to more openly and satisfactorily address the fundamental questions of human existence” (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999, p. 21).

If the trauma forces one to reflect on one’s own mortality, priorities can change so that individuals discuss altering their previously held extrinsic priorities to make them more intrinsic (e.g., interest in money and appearance tend to shift to simpler things, such as time, health, nature, etc.) as well as altering their personal goals (e.g., some report changes to life goals such as returning to school or retraining in a new skill). Lykins, Segerstrom, Averill, Evans, and Kemeny (2007) found that following exposure to mortality awareness (e.g., an earthquake or 9/11), individuals altered their goal orientations from extrinsic (e.g., materials or social popularity) to more intrinsic (e.g., close relationships with loved ones) ones.

Moreover, conscious death reminders, exposure to death, and death reflection exercises are linked with increased appreciation and gratitude (Frias, Watkins, Webber, & Froh, 2011; Lykins et al., 2007), increased environmental concern (Vess & Arndt, 2008), strengthening of prosocial values—such as enhanced tolerance, altruism, sense of compassion and empathy, forgiveness, and kindness for the society one lives in (Vail et al., 2012)—and individual levels of creativity (Routledge & Juhl, 2010).

So, I was curious about the degree to which my student, Katherine, had experienced growth in any of the domains discussed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995). I asked Katherine to reflect in written fashion on each of the growth dimensions. What follows is Here are several several of her her most poignant reflections..

Katherine’s Reflections on Her Own Growth

Relating to Others

“I feel more connected to my family. We were always close, but at the same time we could have always been closer. I think during this time I realized they were the only people who actually cared about my safety. Although I would love to see my friends and return to normal, my friends would never take the precautions my family has to prevent me from getting sick.”

“I was able to spend time thinking about how I express love to my family. I’ve written letters to family members I would usually never reach out to. They kept me sane during this time. I also thought more about the kind of love they would want to feel and receive vs. just my own love language. I also took pleasure in giving little things to them that they didn’t know came from me.”

“Every time I went outside, I couldn’t help but feel connected to everyone else knowing we were all facing this thing together.”

New Possibilities

“During this time, I have been able to focus more on the organizations I am a part of in school and my academics. With everything up in the air and safety restrictions preventing heavy travel, I know I could be stuck online or at home for an indefinite period of time. Therefore, I can now take on larger roles in those organizations and really fulfill leadership responsibilities. Also, I can focus a lot more on school without the external pressures of parties, hangouts, or whatever might be happening on a weekly basis. At this point, my main priority is school.”

“Professionally, the changing economy has allowed me to be more confident in my job search. I think the elimination of many internships will decrease the competitiveness slightly. It is all about surveying your options through the companies that got hit the hardest by COVID-19. After all of the lay-offs and furloughed employees, companies are looking for less expensive labor and a lot of it, which will consist of college students graduating in the next 2 years. That is how we are going to rebuild the economy, through college graduates in entry-level jobs and I am more than excited to be a part of it.”

“This is [a] greater opportunity for community service. Many non-profits, start-ups, and corporations have started programs designed to help people in COVID. If you want to do any good for your resume or your own ego, be safe, but now’s the time.”

Personal Strength

“I’d say this time made me realize how much *optimism* is a strength of mine. Looking back, I was extremely disappointed because my internship got cancelled. Now, I tell my friends and family a whole monologue about why this is only going to improve our story and storytelling capabilities because it lit a fire under us. I knew I could not just sit around all summer, so I didn’t. I went out and got a virtual internship, took on summer roles in my extracurriculars, and made the most of everything. That’s what I am most proud of, my tenacity to do my best and see the positives while taking nothing for granted.”

“I’ve had to practice patience and perseverance. These qualities were in my characteristic pool, but at the shallow end. I was not always patient and understanding, but now I am forced to be. Of course, with more complications, my skills will only get better and there is always room for improvement. However, I learned how I need to harness each of these attributes and why during COVID.”

“Before, I was a paranoid, scared, and anxious wreck. I was always scared of what might happen and anticipating the negatives, ALWAYS. Now, I see things for how they are, I take the facts, and I make of it what I can. Instead of being scared, I am brave, confident, and strong enough to take anything head on. Even if it ends up being the worst-case scenario, I know I tried my hardest and improved on something about myself in the process. Two months later, I know I am ready for anything the world might throw at me now.”

“In all honesty, I want to gain more personal strength and discipline in my selflessness. I am extremely good at being selfish. Doing what is best for me and only thinking about how things will affect me, but COVID is not just about a singular person. If I do not wear a mask, I put everyone at risk, even myself. I want to continue to be more conscientious and aware of what I am doing, why I am doing it, and how it will affect people other than myself. My own bubble may be ‘me, myself, and I’ but the world is ‘me, my family, and 7.6 billion people.’ I want to grow my strength to see this and act on it.”

Spiritual

“I may be one person, and one story, and one experience, but I know that (very obviously) I matter in many ways. What actions I take affect others, and what actions I don’t take have the same effect. Everything affects everything, even if that everything is nothing. My purpose on earth is still to be determined, but I can only think that this historical period has something to do with it. I used to think life was a clear-cut path. You walk the straight line, try not to mess up, and hope for the best. Currently, I know that my entire life is justified not by a path, but by hope. We prepare for the worst and hope for the best. That’s how life will be from now on. I hope I do the right thing; I hope this is

what I was meant to do; and I hope that the greater purpose you're asking about will continue to become clearer as I move through life in this crazy world.”

Appreciation of Life

“I think the answer to this question is still to be determined. I ask myself, and I know other people have asked the same question about this or other things in life, why me? What was the purpose of putting a toll on billions of lives? It's a question that we will never be able to answer, until maybe at the end of our lives. However, I can't live in fear of regret or confusion, as we have already seen how quickly life can change or be taken from us. Right now, I'm just doing my best to make the most of my opportunities, learn as much as I can, and maybe figure out the 'right thing' to do with this so-called opportunity. Life is the opportunity in and of itself, so take what you want from that, but now what that means is we will always be trying to do the right thing. Boiled down, it's about being human—a good human. Care for others, go out of your way to do one nice thing a day (or more), and make people smile. Be better, do better, and strive to encourage others to do the same. The world will be a much better place.”

Summary

Katherine's reflections certainly demonstrate growth and an awareness that many of her core assumptions have changed since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Recognizing that she is but one—naturally optimistic—student, what can be learned from Katherine's experience that might apply to the vast range of students who will be in the classroom next year?

Insights and Suggestions for Teaching

Value individual differences and don't assume one common response to the pandemic is shared by all students. Not all students will experience PTSD or PTG. Students with strong coping skills may be less impacted. Students with poor coping skills will either (a) grapple with the trauma and grow or (b) resist dealing with or potentially fall back on poor coping skills (e.g., escaping, drinking, etc.). Since students will express different coping styles, it may not be obvious which students engaged in deliberative cognitive exploration. Also remember that, even in growth, students can still experience distress. Assume good intent and have compassion.

Be a guide. Share the notion of PTG with your students. Show them the areas for potential growth and have them reflect in teams or in writing on whether they experienced similar shifts in perspective to Katherine's. Provide social support and plant seeds for positive change—as we accompany them in trauma, listen carefully, facilitate reflection, help reframe using our hard-earned wisdom. Remind them what is still within their control. Model optimism. Encourage new learning and help them see the strengths they are already using. Open them up to new possibilities.

If students have indeed shifted from a more extrinsic focus to a more intrinsic one as the literature suggests, continue to communicate the bigger *why* of your class and the assignments, materials, skills, and so forth. Now, more than ever, students may be ripe and ready to absorb such messages. If applicable, connect material and the why to the larger pandemic and societal issues (vs. pretending issues aren't happening).

The process of discovering how little is in their control may have left them craving personal autonomy, control, competence, and relatedness. Giving options within assignments or providing multiple learning paths can increase their sense of control, choice, and autonomy. Scaffolding learning and assignments, along with providing frequent feedback, can help them feel a sense of

competence. Increased group work, while allowing students to reflect together on their growth, can foster a sense of community. Not to mention, vulnerability shared by you, your students, and their peers can become the glue that binds together people as it forces collaboration and increases empathy.

What I have learned from my conversations with Katherine is that while a pandemic can be a challenge to one's core beliefs and be a catalyst for change, such trauma can help define one's character and clarify one's purpose on earth—it's a choice.

Follow-up Reflections

My Thoughts Six Months Later

I applied as many of the above suggestions as possible this semester and would be happy to share the resources I created to introduce the concept of PTG to my students. They consist of a short reading to explain the concept and provide a useful (and I hope more inspiring) framework for processing the pandemic, along with a script for facilitating productive conversations with students, first in a large group and subsequently among themselves in smaller Zoom rooms. I introduced this material at the end of the first day for students in all my courses and then communicated that I would be available to discuss their pandemic concerns—and/or their growth—with them at any time. While I continued to encourage and acknowledge the hard work my students were doing in this challenging time, and repeated that I was available, I didn't bring up pandemic-related issues after that unless they might have direct impact on a piece of course content.

Last, I added four new questions to our standard course evaluations to collect student feedback on various elements of my asynchronous and synchronous strategies, to gauge how effective they were in supporting students' learning and building of community among peers, as well as on my outside-of-class availability, communication, and feedback mechanisms for adjustments going forward. If readers would like to see or discuss any of these materials, please contact me at the email above. In hindsight, I wish I had created a small survey soliciting students' perceptions of their own growth in the various domains outlined by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995).

Katherine's Thoughts About Her Growth Six Months Later

“In a little over six months of handling COVID, I experienced a lot of emotions that burdened my ability to be 100% happy. This is about post-traumatic growth and though I want to say everything was smooth sailing after the initial conversations, I am not going to lie. It was hard. Some days, it was defeat after defeat and others, it was triumph after triumph. While my attention was redirected to focus entirely on school when classes resumed, I was always struggling to stay in the moment. I could not help but think about when COVID would be over and I could enjoy my college experience again. The lesson I took from the past six months is that it's okay to feel grief, guilt, anger, and sadness at the same time you feel happiness, joy, hope, and pride. Life is an ocean with a tide that ebbs and flows, and the simple self-awareness of your own tidal patterns is a gift. As we continue in the COVID era, I am continuing to learn a lot about self-awareness. My advice is to exploit that, recognize what makes you tick, what makes you stir, what makes you feel something other than nothing. From there, you will have a newfound understanding of yourself, an appreciation for your inner thoughts and emotions, and a better grasp on handling reality even at your weakest points.”

Katherine's Advice for Teachers

“Being a student who thoroughly enjoys education and considers classroom discussions fun, I have thought a lot about the successes and failures of our move to primarily on-line learning. The consensus from many of my peers was that we experienced the most value from scheduled synchronous classes. Since COVID eliminated any sense of structure in our lives, being able to wake up with a predictable plan for the day brought a feeling of relief. However, when it came to office hours, professors’ flexibility in providing office hours made them most effective for me and many peers. Not having a small number of designated hours during the week, and instead providing more options through an appointment-only schedule provided more opportunities for us to connect one-on-one and build relationships with professors.

In terms of failures, one of the biggest challenges was balancing the desire for community vs. individual privacy in Zoom classrooms. For example, it was great to see familiar faces on the screen every other day for class, but I realize students may be uncomfortable of their at-home setup or they are too drained mentally or physically to turn on their cameras. It’s a tough line to walk, but I would recommend professors more strongly encourage cameras without making them mandatory. Another perceived challenge I discussed with my peers was that certain professors made COVID too much a part of each class. Especially when the discussion solely reinforced the difficulties of the situation or they vented their own frustrations. Perhaps some students enjoyed the opportunity to vent about the current state of the world, but when the tone was primarily negative and didn’t provide positive reframing, reason for hope, or encourage empathy, the value felt lost. My advice would be for professors to make time for COVID discussions at the end of the class, not the beginning. That way, if students want to stick around and talk about the pandemic they can, but at least they have the option.”

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