Making Meaning and Finding Purpose: What Research into Post Traumatic Growth Can Teach Us as Educators in a Post-Pandemic World

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Abstract: The pandemic presented many opportunities for us to deepen our resiliency and strengthen our resolve. As faculty we faced unique challenges, and the past few years left many of us asking questions about ourselves, and our roles as educators. Drawing on concepts of trauma and research into post-traumatic growth, this paper examines how the latter can help us in navigating our roles as educators in a post-pandemic world. Specifically, I offer some ideas and guided questions in order for us to consider our sense of meaning and purpose, and how we might intentionally engage with these concepts to inform our pedagogy.

Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Concepts of Trauma

On May 5, 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) (2023) declared an end to the COVID-19 pandemic. With this declaration, the WHO reported that at least 20 million people had died from the virus. The WHO (2023) also acknowledged that COVID-19 was more than a global health crisis; it also brought far-reaching social, economic, and political upheaval. The pandemic, and the various socio-political responses to it, caused a number of significant challenges. These included economic challenges, which led to business closures and job losses, ultimately forcing millions of people into poverty; lockdowns and other mandates increased social isolation, which in turn have been identified as contributing factors to notable increases in alcohol use, problematic substance use, and overdoses (Government of Canada, 2022). It is reported that incidents of family and domestic violence increased over this time (United Nations, 2020) and that social isolation coupled with the closing of many of the homeless shelters and violence-against-women shelters forced people to live in situations where they were not safe or forced to continue living with a violent partner. In many communities, we lost family members, friends, and colleagues. Sometimes we didn't get to say goodbye, nor grieve these losses with our traditional practices and rituals.

Given these severe disruptions and challenges, some have referred to the pandemic as a "collective" or "mass" trauma, experienced on a global scale (Berg, 2023; Prideaux, 2021). This is an understandable response – while there is a plethora of definitions of trauma now available, there are generally two over-arching components that are included in each of the various definitions. Trauma experiences are often understood as those that 1) are perceived to significantly compromise our sense of safety and/or survival, and 2) compromise our sense of autonomy (our ability to have choices over what is happening in our lives and what is happening to our bodies).

So, when we consider the question of whether the pandemic was a traumatic event, we can examine the alignment of experiences with the two trauma criteria above. For example, when we're thinking about our sense of safety and/or survival, we remember that for some, contracting the COVID-19 virus was truly life-threatening. In addition, those who lost their source of income would also experience a threat to their survival, as this is directly related to the ability to maintain access to food and shelter/housing. With the closing and/or "scaling back" of our healthcare services, many were unable to access the healthcare they required (Canadian Medical Association, 2021). All of these experiences can be understood as significantly compromising our sense of safety and survival during the pandemic.

With respect to the second component of a trauma experience–the compromising of our autonomy–we can understand this was affected when we remember there were significant restrictions imposed on what we were able to do and not able to do (e.g., our ability to meet and spend time with our loved ones was compromised due to physical distancing protocols). You may recall in Ontario, police were instructed to stop people who were out in public and issue tickets if they could not demonstrate that they were either going to, or coming from, their place of work. Meeting outdoors with those outside of your own household was banned, as was the use of outdoor playgrounds (Nasser & Powers, 2021). Vaccine mandates led to highly divisive politics, about our communal responsibility to each other, and our right to our bodily autonomy (BBC News, 2022). In many ways, issues of autonomy over our own lives and our own bodies were front and center during the pandemic. So, when we look at the components of what makes an experience traumatic, it is understandable that some refer to the pandemic as a trauma experience.

For others, however, the use of the term "mass-" or "collective-trauma" may seem ingenuine or problematic, as the universal use of the same term ("trauma") to refer to such a diversity of experiences can obscure and dismiss the experiences of those who suffered severe hardships and multiple losses, alongside those who did not suffer to the same extent. While those in the latter group may certainly have experienced frustrations, disruptions, challenges, and difficulties, we lose the recognition of these discrepancies when we use the same, singular term to describe them all. For example, there are many who navigated the challenges of COVID-19 while also homeless, or living in refugee camps, or living with violent partners; there were also those who lost their jobs and source(s) of income. It is important for us to acknowledge that these experiences of the pandemic are not the same as they are for those who maintained their employment, housing, and access to health care.

The popular slogan "we're all in this together" is language that obscures the significant socio-economic challenges faced by some, but not others. While we may all have been weathering the same storm, some of us were managing the storm from the safety and stability of a 50ft yacht, while others were left in the frigid, stormy waters, clinging to a pool noodle. It is undeniable that our experiences of the pandemic were informed by a number of socio-economic factors, and these experiences were therefore quite varied. If we equalize our experiences by referring to them as a "collective trauma," we obscure the diversity of these factors, and ignore the significant social disparities that became even more pronounced as the pandemic wore on. Ultimately, we run the risk of losing the lessons we need to learn about the larger socio-economic changes needed to ensure that when crisis hits, everyone experiences some baseline degree of safety and stability.

Regardless of whether we consider our experiences of COVID-19 to be traumatic or not, some of the challenges presented by the pandemic

are aligned with definitions of trauma, and we all experienced various losses and challenges. As educators, we were required to move our classes online, and this had a significant impact on our pedagogy, assessments, and relationships with students. Remote learning came with technological challenges for many students and is reported to have contributed to drops in literacy rates and overall performance, as well as increases in absenteeism and mental health concerns (Alphonso, 2021; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021). In response to these challenges, stories of lowering educational standards to help students "just get through" began to surface. Many of us began asking ourselves larger questions about our roles as educators: "What's the point?", "What difference does this make?", "Who really cares about this?", "Does this matter?" These questions point to a search for meaning and purpose in our work, and here again we find a parallel with trauma experiences, because these questions about meaning and purpose are often the same questions survivors encounter after a traumatic event. So, as COVID-19 is described by some as a traumatic experience, and as the questions we were, and perhaps still are, continuing to grapple with mirror those that often follow a traumatic experience, I offer that regardless of whether we define our experiences as traumatic or not, there are ideas and lessons from trauma research, specifically around post-traumatic growth, that can help us find a way forward.

How can Research into Post-Traumatic Growth Help us as Educators, Post-Pandemic?

Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) is defined as positive change following a traumatic event (Walsh et al., 2018). PTG is understood as an adaptive response to trauma experiences that do not ignore or minimize the trauma, but rather seek to integrate the experience of trauma with new views and understandings of the world. PTG is centered around three key pillars of change: Changes in the perception of self, in the relationships with others , and in one's general philosophy or approach to life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014). And so, as we consider the questions of meaning and purpose post-pandemic, particularly with respect to our roles as educators, we can look to these three pillars of PTG to guide us. While these pillars do not offer specific answers, they do offer a framework within which we can explore how we want to move forward with intention.

Changes in Perception of Self

With respect to our perceptions of our own selves, we can intentionally reflect on what we have learned about ourselves through the experiences of the past three years. What were the challenges we faced and why did we find them challenging? What was it about them that was challenging? And what do these things say about what is important to us?

And at the same time, how did we cope? What are the things that we did to take care of ourselves, and others? What are the things that we adhered to? What are the principles and values that kept us grounded? And

what do these tell us about what's important to us; about what we value the most? Finally, considering these values and principles, how can we use these to inform what we want our future to be?

We can apply this line of questioning specifically to our role as educators; how did we enact our values and principles with respect to our work in the virtual classroom? What values and principles informed our pedagogy when we were required to pivot to virtual delivery? What does this tell us about ourselves, and about how we see ourselves as educators? What are the things that we have learned about ourselves as educators, that can help us navigate challenging times in future?

And finally, how might we encourage students to identify their own values and principles? What might we do to invite them to be mindful about how they can enact these in the classroom? How are these values present for them with respect to their role as a student, a classmate? How will their values guide them in their learning process, and in their educational journey? How are these values reflected in the work they plan to pursue after they've completed their studies?

Reflecting on what the past three years have taught us about ourselves can be helpful in making meaning of our experiences and re-discovering a sense of purpose. By identifying the ways we coped, and what we learned about ourselves, we can identify what is important to us, what our own personal values and guiding principles really are, and then be intentional about how we adhere to them going forward.

Changes in Relationships with Others

Social distancing as well as other public health restrictions and mandates presented many challenges to our relationships with others. We were required to develop new ways of connecting with each other, and conversations about government-imposed restrictions, mandates, politics, science and vaccines were the source of personal and professional discord. Through the past three years, at every level of society, some relationships became strengthened, and others disintegrated. Our relationships with friends, family members, neighbours, colleagues, and students all shifted.

With respect to our relationship with others, we can reflect on which relationships we chose to prioritize and why. Which relationships became strained, and why? These questions are not being asked with an intention to blame or point fingers at others, but rather to identify what it is that we value, and what we learned about ourselves through these relationship changes. What do these experiences and changes teach me about me, or about what is important to me? What do I value in my relationships with others? What was I willing to compromise on, and what was I insistent on? And finally, what does this tell me about how I might be intentional in my relationships going forward?

As educators, we can think about these questions specifically in reference to our relationships with colleagues and students. For example, perhaps some of your own relationships with your colleagues become more

distant, while others more meaningful. Personally, I found my relationships with students shifted significantly, as I found teaching online to be very challenging. When I reflect on *why* this was difficult, it is not because I didn't have access to the technology I needed, nor because I felt uncomfortable teaching from my own home. What made it difficult is that I was unable to build relationships with my students in the same way I could in the classroom. To be removed from the classroom and teaching online, where students would almost never have their cameras on, where my only knowledge of them was their written name, I felt a real disconnection from my students as people; they were names on my teaching roster, without faces, voices, nor personalities. I found it difficult to stay motivated, and to invest in my students as I normally do. Reflecting on why this was such a challenge for me, I realized that my relationship with students is really at the core of my teaching philosophy and pedagogy. It is fundamentally why I enjoy being an educator, and it is what motivates me to do my job to the best of my ability.

As educators, we can reflect upon the questions above with respect to our relationships with students and colleagues, to consider what we might learn from these past three years about our pedagogy and educational values. How did you navigate your relationships with students and colleagues, and what does this teach you about your own values and pedagogy? What is important to you with respect to your relationships with students and colleagues? What does this mean for you in your role as an educator?

Again, we can also encourage our students to ask themselves these same questions. Sometimes being in a classroom can be an isolating experience. At other times, students create lifelong friendships with their classmates. As educators, we can encourage students to reflect on their experiences, and to allow these to inform how they would like to engage in relationships with their classmates, as well as their professors. What do they want their relationships with others to be, and why? How might they be intentional in their pursuit of these? And finally, how might the responses to these questions inform the structure of, and activities within, our classrooms?

Changes in Our General Philosophy and Approach to Life
Finally, with respect to the changes in our general outlook on life, we can consider our experience of the pandemic more as a whole, and identify whether our general outlook, opinions or views on life have changed. For example, have we shifted our priorities? Do we choose to spend more time with family or at work, and why? Have we become more grateful for what we have, or perhaps more determined to advocate for social change? Have we moved towards or away from particular spiritual practices? Have the things we once prioritized become less significant to us now? When so much of our day-to-day got stripped away and upended, when there was an upheaval or an overturning of our "normal" day-to-day

lives, what were we left with? What did we cling to? And again, what does this tell us about what's important to us?

As a small personal example, before the pandemic I would often say that it was important to me to take care of my health – both physical and mental. And yet I found that I was often just "too busy" to engage in even the most basic practices that I knew were good for me; things like eating healthy food, getting enough sleep, and exercising regularly. These are really just the basics of self-care, and yet, despite claiming them to be important to me, I often neglected to practice them. As the pandemic began, and then at points seemed never-ending, I found the social isolation and the lack of separation between work and home to be very challenging to my mental well-being. From this I learned two things: 1) maintaining connection with my family members and close friends is critically important to my well-being, and 2) I had to proactively push myself to engage in these basics of self-care, otherwise my health would significantly decline. I began taking walks every day, and I would try to call a friend or family member while doing so, as I became more and more aware of how important exercise, fresh air, and social connections really are. Reflecting on this allows me to move forward with more intention. I now prioritize these practices more than I used to, because I learned through the pandemic how important they are to me. I am more present during, and grateful for, time spent with loved ones. I am trying to remember now to not take these things for granted.

As educators, we can consider whether our outlook about our work has changed. Are there new or different meanings we make of our work, and what our role really is? Have we considered changes to what we prioritize in the classroom, and if so, why? Have we explored a new sense of gratitude for our opportunities, or perhaps have we become more steadfast in our resolve to address educational inequities? What does this tell us about us? What new outlooks on life have we gained, or adopted, and how might these to continue to serve us?

Final Thoughts

I would like to highlight that when we ask ourselves these questions, the intention is not to revisit trauma events or experiences, but rather to identify how we have grown, and what we have learned. How did we cope, and what does this teach us about ourselves? In keeping with trauma-informed practices, we don't need to be asking ourselves or our students about specific trauma events or experiences, because this is not where our learning and growth are found. Rather, we are all invited to look at how we *responded* to the challenges of the past few years. How did we take care of ourselves? How did we cope? What did we do? What did we prioritize? And what does this tell us about ourselves, our relationships with others, and how we want to live our lives? In this way, we ensure we are engaging with these reflections in a trauma-informed way; not by focusing on the details of any traumatic experiences, but rather on our strengths and our resolve. In

keeping with another concept underlying PTG, I can definitively say that I'm not "glad" the pandemic happened, but I can certainly try to find meaning in the experience and identify what I can learn from it. In keeping with the teachings of Viktor Frankl (1959) and logotherapy: I cannot control that the pandemic happened, but I can control my response to it. Theories underpinning PTG encourage our responses to the pandemic to include personal reflections about how our views of ourselves, our relationships with others, and our larger world view have shifted. In doing so, we find meaning and purpose in our experiences, and we can then integrate these understandings into our future directions.

Finally, when we remember the two common components of what defines a traumatic event–the loss of safety and of autonomy–reflecting on these questions allows us opportunity to regain a sense of safety and control, by taking a hold of our own narratives. By furthermore allowing these reflections to inform our understanding of ourselves, our relationships, and how it is we want to move forward in the world, we are reclaiming our autonomy. What I have tried to detail here can be an empowering process because it reminds us that we have power and agency to create our own story; and *that* is inherently healing.

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