

“This Time, It’s Urgent”: Becoming Skillful in Sustainable Teaching

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Smack-dab in the middle of Molly’s class, a student walks to the front of the room for the *fifth* time that period to say, “Ms. Robbins, this time, it’s urgent.” As he approaches, Molly can feel her heart rate rising and stress fluttering in her belly, signaling that she has a choice: she can react by yelling, “Greg, have a seat *now!*” or she can pause to imagine how she might create connection instead. After taking a deep breath, Molly walks Greg to his seat while continuing the lesson, then follows up with him later in the period. Luckily, he responds positively because she has redirected with kindness.

Okay, let’s get real. On another day, this incident might have gone south. If Molly had yelled at Greg, she likely would have provoked his anger and discombobulated the rest of her students, too. But in this case, Molly was able to respond rather than react because of the skills she’s developed in sustainable teaching (ST), the theory we introduced in our last column, which you can find here: <https://tinyurl.com/342sz88z>.

In *Cultivating Genius*, Gholdy Muhammad defines skills as the “competence, ability, and expertise” that students must demonstrate in important areas of learning (2020, p. 85). She also emphasizes that teachers must be “skillful” in their instruction and their discipline. Thus, in writing this column, we asked ourselves, “What does it look like to be ‘skillful’ in sustainable teaching? How can we develop and hone our ‘competence, ability, and expertise’ within the ST framework?”

The Genius Moves below draw on ST theory to address these questions by urging you to embrace your own vulnerability, listen to your body, and practice mindful self-compassion.

GENIUS MOVE #1: Acknowledge and Embrace Your Vulnerability

Vulnerability often gets a bad rap because it can be associated with susceptibility to disease, emotional pain, or physical harm. Yet Brené Brown, who has studied vulnerability for over 20 years, points out that it isn’t “a dark emotion, nor is it always a light, positive experience. Vulnerability is the core of all emotions and feelings. To feel is to be vulnerable” (2015a).

If vulnerability is “the emotion that we experience during times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” (Brown, 2021, p. 13), you may be wondering how embracing it could possibly be a Genius Move. However, think about how often you tell your students, “There are no wrong answers here! Just give it a shot!” If this sounds familiar, chances are that you, like Brown, believe in the axiom, “no vulnerability, no learning” (Brown, 2017). Then, shouldn’t you feel some urgency to practice vulnerability?

The following real-life examples demonstrate what practicing workplace vulnerability has looked like for us, just this school year:

- admitting to students that we don’t know the answer to a tough question but will work hard to find out;
- being honest with a colleague who has crossed a boundary and explaining why it exists for us;
- asking for forgiveness from a colleague when we have crossed *their* boundary;
- speaking up in a department meeting to say that diversifying the curriculum is an important first step toward anti-racist teaching, but we need to do more; and

vulnerability

- asking an administrator to extend a deadline because we're physically exhausted.

Only you can fully determine what vulnerability looks like for you, based on the context where you teach and live and your own cultural positionality. For instance, it may be relatively easy for the approximately 80 percent of teachers who identify as white to break out the finger-snaps, slam-poetry style, when asked to exercise vulnerability. By contrast, a study of "justice-oriented teachers of Color" reveals that schools were often damaging places for them as students, and may even continue to be "detrimental" to "their well-being and their professional retention, growth, and success" as teachers (Kohli, 2021, p. 4).

Aiko Bethea also observes that from early on in school all the way into adulthood, BIPOC bodies in predominantly white spaces "are vulnerable even when we have not chosen to be" (2021, p. 186). Nevertheless, she argues that "leaning into connection, compassion, and courage" (i.e., practicing vulnerability) is possible. She writes, "We may not be able to control the fact that we are by default vulnerable in this society . . . but we can share our narrative on our terms and use it for connection and empowerment" within BIPOC communities and with white allies (p. 188).

The onus of creating vulnerability-friendly zones cannot be on educators from BIPOC and other underrepresented communities alone, however. Finger-snapping white folks must also do their own work, listen more than they speak, own up when they mess up, and use their privilege and power toward the goal of dismantling white supremacy.

If practicing Genius Move #1 still feels like a big ask, it may help to remember that vulnerability is also "the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, empathy, innovation, and creativity." Thus, by avoiding vulnerability, we may "distance ourselves from the experiences that bring purpose and meaning to our lives" (Brown, 2015b, p. 275). Surely, one of those experiences is our teaching.

Genius Move #2: Listen to Your Body

We hope you'll indulge us while we get a little "science-y" in this section. We're doing so because we and other ST teachers have found this information to be helpful in understanding why, when the body calls, we really

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should pick up the phone. To see how the body "speaks," let's return to our opening scenario from Molly's classroom.

As the student approached Molly while she was teaching, her body started ramping up. She felt the urge to start pacing, and almost as if she were riding a rollercoaster, a fluttery sensation arose in her stomach, her breathing became shallow, and she felt shaky. Because listening to her body is a habit Molly has honed through sustainable teaching, however, she quickly realized that these "messages"

meant that her *sympathetic nervous system* (SNS) was going into overdrive, flooding her body with adrenaline and other hormones and activating her fight-flight-freeze response.

Neuroscientists explain that the SNS is most recognizable when we're in imminent danger, such as when a speeding bus is barreling our way (Tindle & Tadi, 2021). By contrast, our *parasympathetic nervous system* is in operation when we're relaxed, which is why it's referred to as the "rest-and-digest" response. Both systems are necessary (after all, we don't want to get run over by a bus), and they operate in an intricate dance: in any given moment, our body reacts to signals in our environment to move us away from physical danger and toward safety.

We run into trouble, however, when everything seems urgent, and our SNS is chronically activated. Whether it's caused by a speeding bus or a student who's constantly pushing our buttons, the nervous system can't tell the difference, so it signals the prefrontal cortex to go off-line, thus rendering the logical brain all but useless. In a frustrating moment, we might lash out in anger, as Molly could have done in the earlier scenario. In the short term, our mood and concentration level can be negatively affected, too, culminating in an official bad day. But over time, our sleep quality and energy levels may be reduced, and in the long term, our overall health can suffer, possibly leading to serious, life-threatening conditions and disorders (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Thus, at any stage from immediate reaction to long-term response, if we do not listen to our body and intervene with intention, we may later regret what transpires.

Let's view the opening scenario through the above scientific lens. As Molly's student approached the front of the classroom, listening to her body's signals gave her the presence of mind to pause and breathe deeply. As her heart rate decreased, and the stress began dissipating,

Molly realized that a small space of (literal) breathing room had opened up for her, which allowed her to respond to Greg with intention rather than react to him in anger. The ripple effect on the rest of her students was probably significant, too, and as an added bonus, Molly strengthened her brain’s “listening muscles,” thus increasing the likelihood that she will respond positively in similar situations in the future.

Learning to listen like this to the body’s messages doesn’t come instinctively because there’s so much literal and metaphorical noise in teaching. To start honing your own “listening skills,” check out this simple micropractice we call “STIC It to the Stress!,” based on the acronym created by clinical psychologist, Sam Himelstein (2016). You can access it using the QR code (see Figure 1) or by accessing this link: <https://tinyurl.com/432n4pkk>.

Our biological goal is always to create social connection and belonging, according to neuroscientist Stephen Porges (2011). Reacting in less-than-stellar ways, however, heightens stress and signals danger to others. That’s why it’s important for us as teachers, who have the most mature nervous systems in the room, to show our students an alternative way of being. After all, we cannot *really* teach, and they cannot *really* learn, if we feel a sense of disconnection.

Genius Move #3: Practice Mindful Self-Compassion

Things will not always go the way you want them to. You will encounter frustrations, losses will occur, you will make mistakes, bump up against your limitations, fall short of your ideals. This is the human condition, a reality shared by all of us. The more you open your heart to this reality instead of constantly fighting against it, the more you will be able to feel compassion for yourself and all your fellow humans in the experience of life.

—Kristen Neff

This passage, taken from the website of self-compassion researcher Kristen Neff, could describe teaching on any given day, but it’s applicable to anyone who could use some self-compassion, which she defines simply as the act of “[giving] ourselves the same kindness and care we’d give to a good friend” who’s hurting or in trouble (2022). Embedded within the passage are the three elements of self-compassion, which include: (a) self-



FIGURE 1. QR code leading to the micropractice for STIC It to the Stress!

kindness, (b) recognition of our common humanity, and (c) mindfulness.

Just as it sounds, *self-kindness* involves giving yourself grace “when confronted with painful experiences.” The second element, *recognition of our common humanity*, could easily be reduced to the *unself-compassionate* view that “everyone suffers, so ‘suck it up, Buttercup.’” But Neff’s research points in the opposite direction, saying that *because* everyone experiences suffering, we can know we aren’t alone. Finally, *mindfulness* allows us to observe how our body and emotions feel in the present moment, using curiosity instead of self-judgment, so that we can respond with intention instead of a knee-jerk reaction.

We’ve heard people equate mindfulness with the sentiment “it is what it is,” which is often spoken with a tone of resignation. While it’s important to recognize the realities of your present circumstances so that you aren’t in denial about them, the notion we’ve found to be far more helpful is “you are where you are.” Recognizing your current constraints not only allows you to proceed with greater intention, but it also acknowledges that, sometimes, the demands that others are placing on you (or that you’re placing on yourself) aren’t really urgent, and *you don’t need to strive to do, or be, more*. By pausing, without self-judgment, to determine whether you have the capacity (or not) to act in a particular circumstance, you are practicing mindful self-compassion.

Rachel Gutter, an environmentalist activist, sums up this approach powerfully with the question, “Where can I contribute most from the place where I am now?” (as cited in Salzberg, 2020, p. 207). Answering this question with mindful self-compassion sometimes reveals that we need to devote special attention to ourselves so that we can show up in other areas and for other people in our lives.

You can access numerous resources related to self-compassion on Kristen Neff's website, <https://self-compassion.org/>, including a 26-question self-compassion test and numerous guided practices ranging from 5–27 minutes in length, making them easily doable on your planning period.

In the next issue, we'll offer more Genius Moves for finding the people and places to feed your intellect. Until then, go get your genius on. This time, it's urgent.

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