
Reflection in Online Education

Communicating with students using skills from dialectical behavior therapy

Tree Neis, MAOM, MS
Independence University

Abstract: In reviewing student completion and satisfaction scores, assessing instructor delivery, student outreach and tools for success, we can apply basic psychology to benefit not only the student, but also help instructors find streamlined best practices.

Keywords: dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), teacher-student communication, student support, online education



Journal of Online Higher Education

ISSN: 2575-1204

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Introduction

In the last year, Independence University has looked at how to support both students and instructors by reviewing, assessing, and updating many courses, as well as through examining the classroom experience. Instructors were asked to review lectures, provide outreach, give feedback to assess and fine-tune areas students may be struggling, and adjust teaching methods and delivery. With the current social climate—with many students who are struggling financially, mentally, or emotionally, and may be facing major life crisis moments—everyone can take this time to review how to best support the students while also supporting ourselves in the process.

To expand on this changing mindset, Independence University's monthly faculty meetings have been focusing on not only our student support, but also our own personal well-being. In one of these meetings for General Education faculty, we reviewed dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), which is a type of cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy. DBT is in a workbook format, offering a best practice mindset for people to apply daily critical thinking and problem-solving life skills that can be applied to any situation by focusing on our thought process and whether it is positive or negative (McKay, Wood, & Brantley, 2019). For instance, for a negative mindset of "I am going to fail," one can use the DBT skill of wise mind, which is a behavioral tool and skill to trigger the positive thought process of resolving an issue or situation instead of a negative (and often self-sabotaging) thought process.

In order to understand how the DBT workbook is applied, we need to understand the four core areas, which are interpersonal effectiveness, core mindfulness, emotional regulation, and distress tolerance (McKay, Wood, & Brantley, 2019). Each area is broken down into worksheets focusing on problem solving and critical thinking skills, how we act or react in response to life's stressors, and how to increase self-actualization. After using these skills over time, the process becomes an automatic response in all areas of a person's life challenges, creating more positive than negative outcomes in the process.

When asked to review my current processes for weekly lectures, outreach, and feedback, my go-to is the core mindfulness area from the DBT workbook (McKay, Wood, & Brantley, 2019). In doing this, the skills I use are (1) **wise mind**, where one balances emotion and reason by looking at all the facts of an issue, with ongoing assessment and review and adjusting as needed; (2) **pros and cons**, or examining the options and their advantages or disadvantages

(which is really important for students who think they will fail before starting class); and (3) **stay in the moment** (or focus on task), where one only looks at a situation or issue today instead of what happened in the past or what could happen in the future.

Implementing DBT Skills in Student Support

Lectures

Reviewing my weekly lecture practices in following DBT has taken time to assess the best way to deliver the material and this process remains ongoing. It is important to understand how people learn either visually, verbally, or by doing, and incorporating all three of these learning styles can be tricky. In addition, the order the information is delivered needs to be uniform each week to set the foundation for positive critical thinking. Each week's lectures are organized in the following order: introductory slide, housekeeping and weekly updates, a review of the previous week's work, a review of the upcoming week's work, and then the weekly lecture itself. The week's work is always arranged in the order of discussion, assessment, and assignment because students naturally submit them in this order: the initial discussion post is due earlier than other work, but most students then complete the assessment followed by the assignment because the latter takes more time and people procrastinate. In addition, setting up the lectures in this format also sets a pattern where the student and instructor can quickly understand where they need to start if they fall behind or where they stopped (discussion, assessment, or assignment). Additionally, reviewing the previous week's work before the current week's work is considered best practice.

After reviewing the expectations for the week, the lecture transitions into the content being discussed, all the while connecting it to the weekly assignments or information from the previous week(s); this helps the student and instructor stay in the moment when reviewing the lecture. In addition, connecting the information to a person's personal, professional and academic life helps create fuller understanding. Regardless of whether a person is facing an issue or problem in school, at home, or at work, one can apply the DBT skills and tools to handle life's many crisis moments by learning to stop, assess, review, and start strategizing what the best outcome could or would be. However, as we become more comfortable implementing and fine-tuning these areas of our lives over time, we also need to understand there will be good, bad and ugly experiences as well. Understanding as we grow, mature, and have different experiences in life, along with our backgrounds, personalities and comfort level in handling different

situations will also have more positive outcomes making life a little smoother in the process until the next crisis hits.

Outreach and Feedback

Announcements

In reviewing outreach and feedback, I aligned DBT skills with announcements. In thinking back to how I liked to receive communications from my instructors when I was a student, I found it helpful when the announcements provided direct information, a little humor or encouragement, and something related to the class. This takes time to properly assess and review (depending on the class or information being relayed) and is ongoing from class to class.

Keeping with the DBT skills previously discussed, announcements are important because they engage the student. When posting announcements, it helps to make them relevant with pictures to add visual stimuli to the information. In addition, deciding what days would have the most impact is just as important; for me, I determined that Monday (lecture day), Wednesday (discussion), Friday (TGIF), Saturday (first warning and encouragement), and Sunday (deadline and encouragement) are the best days to have announcements. To add to this, the course tutor's slides are posted on Tuesday, so students will receive an alert or update from me or one of the tutors assigned to the class almost every day.

Emails

After reviewing the current weekly outreach plan, I found that if on Mondays (which are live lecture days), I send students an email with the recording, along with a PDF study guide and any other materials the student may need for the week, it increased the number of students who watched the lecture recording. The reason behind this decision was due to students sending me emails asking where to find the Zoom links or other repeated questions covered in the lecture, which indicated that these students were not watching or reviewing the live lecture. In response, the normal question in return is asking if they did watch the lecture because in it I reviewed the discussion, assessment, and assignment in detail, which the student usually responds to with an "I will watch the lecture" email.

The next day an outreach communication is done is on Wednesday (weekly emails for at risk students for weeks 2, 3, and 4). There is then an email on Fridays—because everyone can use a happy "TGIF" email, even if it is a reminder of work due—which is followed by the final weekly email reminder on Sunday (the weekly submission deadline), along with words of

encouragement. There are also kudos emails for discussions, when there is a great discussion thread going on. I noticed after doing this a few times, participation increased with more content being discussed and fewer “compliment responses.”

If there are early submissions, I send out a congratulatory email on Saturday stressing how relaxing Sunday will be if work was submitted early, which encourages students to think with the wise mind and pros and cons skills from the DBT workbook (McKay, Wood, & Brantley, 2019). The student reads the email and thinks, “If I get my paper done today instead of [activity], then I can do [activity] tomorrow and really relax.” Sending this out is also beneficial for me because I can get a jump on grading while the students are encouraged, supported, and have a new boost of self-confidence. This attitude on early submissions also demonstrates how I can use pros and cons, stay in the moment, and wise mind—it becomes a win-win scenario for both the instructor and the student when both are excited to work ahead.

Feedback

A best practice for me is to emphasize the importance of reading feedback; while most people automatically think of feedback as something negative, I disagree. Feedback is only negative when delivered in a negative way. Still, people do not like reading the negative and so usually miss great information, advice, or direction for improvement. This is where the DBT skills kick in, prompting the person to focus on the critique without emotions or taking it personally. The four core areas of interpersonal effectiveness also motivate us by creating more confidence in our communication skills, supporting core mindfulness and being more engaged in our day, and allowing us to have more days that are positive by reducing negative behaviors and situations.

Feedback is an area everyone can work on, both in giving it and receiving it. I use templates with detailed comments that allows me to offer direct feedback on just the students work and deleting out comments not relevant to the work. This helps ensure I only offer ways to improve the current work and encourage them. An example of this is when a student submits late work: a common note left addresses the work being late, but it continues to encourage the student using the three DBT tools discussed. The comments on a good, but late, paper would say, “I understand this is late. I am *not* taking late points due to submitting quality work. It was definitely worth the wait and a pleasure to read. Go Team You for finishing the week strong!” If the student submits a paper short on word count or substance, the note instead says, “I am *not*

taking late points due to other points lost, but I am open to you resubmitting it for a better grade. If you choose not to resubmit by Wednesday, the grade will stand as is.” In doing this, the instructor lets the student know there is opportunity for improvement; they will either rise to the next level or not—the choice is for the student to make. In doing this, the instructor offers every opportunity to help, along with the tools to get it done.

Effects on Students

For the past year, I have been playing with feedback by adjusting, assessing, and getting feedback from students trying to incorporate all three learning styles (visual, audial, and by experience) along with connecting the content and feedback to motivate and inspire students to take it to the next level. Over this time frame, I found completion and satisfaction scores increasing. There has also been a rise in the completion rates of the career integration and end of course survey and I have also been getting more comments from my students. I believe that because I asked for feedback, they started offering it.

When a negative comment is left about what I “did not do” or “help I did not give,” there are at least three others whose experience was completely different. I can review the student’s work and attendance in class and assess if I could have done anything else to help them outside of what I normally do; this uses my core mindfulness skills to assess my performance each module. While I realize that not all students will pass the class (or are repeating the class, as we have all had a student scheduled from mod to mod) but it my hope that each student will choose to engage in my class carrying what they learned moving forward.

References

- McKay, M., Wood, J. C., & Brantley, J. (2019). *The dialectical behavior therapy skills workbook: Practical DBT exercises for learning mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, emotion regulation, and distress tolerance* (2nd ed.). New Harbinger Publications.