

Freedom Dreaming

by Amy Lewis

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Throughout the many challenges of this semester, including the moments of grief, anger, a sense of uncertainty regarding teaching during a pandemic, and a wide range of emotions, I find comfort in allowing myself to deeply dream and imagine a future where current structures and systems are radically transformed so that they no longer cause immense harm. As an instructor, I dream about a teaching environment where students, instructors, staff, and all support personnel are cared for in radical ways.

For this Teaching Toolbox, I invite us, as faculty members, to use Kelly's concept of Freedom Dreaming as a foundation for us to imagine a radical future that embraces our academic autonomy outside of systemic constraints. Based on the teachings of [Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.](#), historian and academic [Robin D.G. Kelly](#) invites his readers to dream of a world where Dr. King and the liberatory visionaries freedom fighters' dreams, such as Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Audre Lorde, Malcolm X, Angela Davis, and many others, were to come to fruition. Kelly states, "Imagine if that soul were to win out, if the movement's vision of freedom were completely to envelope the nation's political culture. If this were the case, then the pervasive consumerism and materialism and the stark inequalities that have come to characterize modern life under global capitalism could not possibly represent freedom" (xi). He concludes the preface of his book, [Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination](#) (2002), by sharing, "Without new visions we don't know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us" (xii).

Within this toolbox, I hope to frame freedom dreaming in a way that connects to the incredible insights and resources provided by the previous teaching toolboxes focused on [abolitionist teaching](#) and teaching during the pandemic. From [Daisy Breneman's brave honesty of embracing care](#) by recognizing the very real struggle of having to participate in pre-pandemic activities while the pandemic still exists to [Emily Gravett's recognition of being back to normal as being anything but normal](#), the act of imagining and collectively dreaming of what we desire as faculty can be a radical act to identify our most idealistic working, teaching, and community environments.

Freedom dreams center the needs of those most impacted by structural barriers (such as racism, effects of capitalism; in addition to homophobic, sexist, and other practices) in order to explicitly imagine how those barriers can be eliminated. This act of deep and radical imagination, as adrienne maree brown describes through [Pleasure Activism](#) and

[Emergent Strategy](#), allows for us as individuals, as an institution, and as a collective to not only recognize the structural barriers that create and maintain exclusion, but to dream of how these barriers can be eradicated. An additional resource includes [Octavia's Brood](#) where contributors honor Octavia Butler's work and stories focus on "the intersections of identity and imagination, the gray areas of race, class, gender, sexuality, love, militarism, inequality, oppression, resistance, and—most important—hope" (3). [JMU Civic hosted an event](#) in June 2020, where professors, students, and community members could discuss what it means to end systemic racism and create an inclusive society. This type of dialogue establishes an opportunity to not only acknowledge the lived realities within the oppressive structures that exist at JMU, but to then name and identify a JMU environment where those oppressive structures no longer exist.

As instructors, the act of freedom dreaming can generate the opportunity to identify the most desired environment in which to teach, learn, and grow. Dreaming creates a reprieve from the harsh reality we currently experience. Explicitly stating the most ideal working environment establishes a direct goal to reach as a collective.

I invite faculty to reflect on the following prompts to begin to formulate the dreams you desire:

- In recognizing the delicate balance of being able to dream without parameters, what is your dream for your work environment?
- What is your dream for the students you teach or interact with?
- What barriers currently exist at JMU that prevent you from obtaining your desires within higher education?
- What possible collective opportunities of collaboration, solidarity, or unification currently exist (or can be created) at JMU?
- Who are the allies or co-conspirators that can help you attain your desires?
- What is your dream for society as a whole?

These questions can establish a baseline on which to dream. The act of dreaming should not be limited to faculty or instructional staff. As I conclude this toolbox, I encourage you to consider how these questions might be incorporated within the classroom. How might students interact or embrace the questions above? What possibilities exist with co-dreaming from both students and instructors focused on care and vulnerability? Prioritizing imagination creates an opportunity to name the future you desire. Even though teaching during a pandemic may evoke feelings of powerlessness, being able to engage in freedom dreaming allows you to identify how you can create the systemic shifts you believe need to occur for a more safe, equitable, and livable environment.

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