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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Saying Farewell

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## Saying Farewell

by Amy Lewis

As many of us anticipate the end of the semester and school year, I find myself in deep reflection of my experience at JMU for the past three years. With this being my final semester at JMU, due to accepting a tenure-track position at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I wanted to use this Toolbox as a retrospective space to detail experiences and teaching approaches that have helped strengthen the foundation of my career as an instructor within academia. I am truly grateful for the individuals who have influenced and greatly impacted my time at JMU.

The many teaching strategies I've gained have been the product of collaborative efforts and community connections. Like many junior faculty members who struggle with the decision to stay or leave the institution, I also had moments of feeling isolated and undervalued for the expected work to obtain tenure. Establishing connections and relationships through spaces such as [Sisters in Session](#) and the [Preparing Future Faculty Program](#) (with special thanks to Dave Stringham, Jesse Rathgeber, and David Owusu-Ansah) opened the door for multiple types of opportunities and provided the support I needed to ground myself in academia.

Having the opportunity to co-facilitate a course with three other faculty members is one of the most valued experiences I have had within my teaching career. Team teaching provided a chance to not only collaborate with fellow colleagues, it was an opportunity to learn how other instructors incorporate approaches such as [critical pedagogy](#) and anti-oppressive practices in the classroom. I co-facilitated a cross-listed course titled [The Antiracist Gen Ed Project](#) with Dr. Tolu Odumosu, Dr. Carah Ong-Whaley, and Dr. Allison Fagan. This course was in collaboration with [X-Labs](#), [AAAD](#), [Honors College](#), [CVPA](#), [LAXC](#), [CAL](#), [ISAT](#), and [JMU Civic](#), and it was tasked with exploring ways to incorporate antiracist and inclusionary practices to "ensure that every JMU student is allowed to be confronted with, and challenged by the grim reality of discrimination in American life and culture in a bid to ensure that the lessons of the past are fully learned, so they are not repeated, in order to create a future where all can thrive and flourish" ([Teaching Antidiscrimination in Gen Ed](#)). Although I experienced challenges in navigating how to address systemic oppression within [an institution that paused DEI training for their incoming first-year class](#), I found solace in exploring and learning with the co-facilitators and students.

In addition to team teaching efforts, I have expanded my ability to provide instructional support to fellow faculty members as a [CFI Faculty Associate for Teaching](#). The CFI Teaching Team meets

regularly to organize programs and coordinate efforts focused on instructional growth. During one particular team meeting, we discussed different approaches to [solicit effective midterm feedback](#) from students to adjust and modify instruction to meet students' needs. In addition to asking students to consider possible modifications to the course or instruction, it is important for students to also identify characteristics of the course and instructor that they appreciate. Another strategy of obtaining useful feedback is a prompt that asks students to reflect and evaluate their performance and contributions to the class. Have the students take responsibility for their contributions to the learning environment. This type of critical reflection can provide an opportunity to gather and use feedback to recenter the course objectives in a way that addresses the needs within the learning environment.

Embracing a combination of antiracist and [abolitionist teaching perspectives](#) has greatly impacted my instructional approach too. In the book [Antiracist Professional Development for Inservice Teachers](#), the authors state that critical reflection, from a critical pedagogical perspective, "can support teachers in transforming their classrooms into democratic, empowering, antiracist learning spaces" (p. 65). This type of reflection involves an intentional process that can include reflective journaling, internal and external feedback, and acknowledging the context in which you teach. According to the [Abolitionist Teaching Guide for Racial Justice and Social Emotional Learning](#), abolitionist teaching centers on creating equitable learning conditions by addressing the source, structures, and practices that produce harm in order to create an environment for students who are most impacted by structural oppression to thrive. In a previous CFI Teaching Toolbox titled [Abolitionist Teaching](#), Daisy Breneman and Joshua Streeter provide a detailed application for abolition approaches within the classroom. With teaching during a global pandemic, where instructors and students had to pivot their learning environments in unexpected ways, I also leaned on abolitionist perspectives to inform my attendance policies where I provided hybrid instruction for students who choose not to learn in person out of safety for themselves and their community. I continue to consider ways to fully accommodate students' needs in order to create an effective learning environment. Abolitionist teaching enables me to continuously consider and identify the source and replication of harm in order to create a learning environment for students' needs to be met.

As I embrace the future, I look forward to maintaining the connections and relationships I've built at JMU. I will continue to strengthen the tools and skills I have gained from colleagues and students while dreaming for a more just society. I am truly grateful for a community that is not bound to one institution.

With much love and solidarity,  
Amy

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