

Re-Energizing Our Teaching for the End of the Semester (or Any Other Time)

by Kayla Yurco

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I've been thinking a lot about routine this semester—largely because I haven't yet found one. With all the challenges of the past two years, [a return to “normal”](#) still feels anything but. At the same time, a familiar sense of mini-routine has crept into the day-to-day of my classrooms. It's the kind of routine I often don't notice until a few weeks after it's arrived, when the newness of the semester has worn off and we're in the swing of things. This can be truly positive: I know students' names, they talk to one another more freely, expectations are clear. There is comfort in routine. And, this semester, slipping into that modest routine for a few hours a week feels like something to celebrate.

But, as the story regularly goes, before I have time to revel in that comfort, the “mid-semester slump”—the real “Wednesday” of the semester—creeps in and makes everything a little more taxing. Grading piles up and class prep needs march on. With our daylight hours shrinking (making the end of those late afternoon classes a very different experience in November than, say, August), I feel the need to be more intentional about how I'm gathering, sharing, and rebuilding my energies to show up for teaching, both for my students and for myself.

In a [recent article from *The New Yorker*](#), Nick Paumgarten defined energy as “both biochemical and psychophysical, vaguely delineated, widely misunderstood, elusive as grace. You know it when you got it, and even more when you don't.” It is no secret that teaching requires many kinds of labor and, with that labor, energy. That our labor is tied up in the risk for [burnout](#) makes it all the more important to regularly reflect on the energies that serve our work. While we know energy can't be created out of thin air, sometimes it can be nudged into existence, or simply rekindled, with a little change of pace: a new strategy, a new technique, a new setting. The following ideas are meant to offer just that. While there isn't perfect alchemy for every instructor or every course, I hope these suggestions make the pursuit of energy a little more graceful and a little less elusive.

Re-evaluate your use of space in the classroom. [Space matters](#), as do our connections to the places in which we learn and work. What can you change about the physical environment of your classroom—or how your group inhabits it? If you have flexible seating, consider moving tables into clusters for small-group discussion. In classrooms where I can't move seats, occasionally I show up early to greet students as they enter and suggest they go to a different seat than their usual (even if it's just one seat away). Sometimes new individuals to speak with can result in new perspectives or new friends, with good energies to follow. You can fill space differently, too: Jessica Del Vecchio, another CFI Faculty Associate, generates energy in the room by playing music at the start of her classes. For a significant change of pace, you can [pre-arrange](#) to hold outdoor discussions or lectures at JMU's [Arboretum](#). Or, for a warmer option, consider visiting [Science On a Sphere \(SOS\)](#) in the EnGeo building. While it's often used for

teaching in the natural sciences, students and instructors from many disciplines use it for [visualization](#) of geospatial information relevant to their courses.

Invite a [guest speaker](#). Are there subject matter experts whose voices you can amplify? Consider, too, colleagues, students, or alumni who might especially benefit from the opportunity to guest lecture in your course. In my senior seminars, I invite to class one or more alumni applying to or beginning graduate school to reflect on how course content shows up in their work. Shifts to online and hybrid environments have created [new opportunities for guest lectures](#), and the experience can create longer-term networking opportunities for students. If you choose to do this, remember that asking others to do guest lectures requires their labor and deserves your care. It's especially important to recognize power dynamics and the value of guest labor when making requests of emerging scholars or those from marginalized or underrepresented groups. Consider if you or your department can offer honoraria or other in-kind services of value, too, and be intentional about how you prepare from the moment of the invite to the time you are actually [hosting](#).

Revisit your syllabus and [consider adjustments](#). For many, it's been a tough semester, following a string of tough semesters. Are there readings or assignments that can be removed, shortened, or simplified, while still allowing learning objectives to be met? In several of my case study-driven courses, if I am confident students have gotten the hang of analyzing new material, sometimes, rather than asking them to digest new content, I ask them to engage in a reflective exercise mid-semester: how can they imagine using course content or skills in one year? Five years? In their dream job/future? The act of helping our students synthesize and remember why they are interested in the material can re-motivate and re-energize them and, indirectly, us.

Switch up course materials, even for a day. Think about material you like to consume about the course topics you teach. Can you share those materials, and why you find them interesting, with students? If you're committed to a textbook or other materials, consider [open and affordable course content](#) that might help complement what you're doing but offer a change of pace. Consider assigning or using audiovisual media, which are known to [enable technology-enhanced learning](#) by emphasizing specific concepts or broadening perception through representation. JMU has [access](#) to thousands of films, documentaries, classic movies, and other educational videos. As a reminder, [universal design](#) principles suggest using [captioned](#) videos, [alt-text](#), and other [accessible learning materials](#) in our course content. Each semester I try to assign at least one film for homework and one for use in class right around the midpoint of the semester when students are otherwise steeped in the routine of readings. (I've had great success with [Kanopy](#), [Alexander Street](#), and [Docuseek](#).) There's also [Khan Academy](#) with practice activities, especially for STEM fields, and plenty of instructional videos relevant to all disciplines that can help break up lecture time.

Begin class by connecting to current events. What is happening locally, nationally, or globally that ties to content or skills learned in your course? Consider asking students to engage with all or part of a podcast or radio broadcast for homework or at the start of class. Scope and scale can vary: I use clips from national outlets like National Public Radio's [All Things Considered](#) as case studies to apply course concepts just as often as more local outlets like [JMU's Democracy Matters Podcast](#). On content-heavy days mid-semester, I like to break up lecture with a short

[TED Talk](#) or an act from a [This American Life](#) episode. Both have great search functions to find what might be relevant to your course and transcripts to help with discussion. I like these resources because they introduce students to other voices, re-focus student attention, reduce my lecture prep (thus buying me some energy back), and help students apply what they're learning to real-time events, all at once.

Remember that you don't have to over-commit. This is perhaps not the time to overhaul your courses or teaching styles; indeed, the goal is to re-energize, not exhaust. What is one thing you can do this week that might inspire new enthusiasm? There are plenty of [small changes in teaching](#) that can have big impacts for learning and motivation for you *and* your students. James Lang, author of *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*, offers that these changes can happen in [under five minutes](#), and even [online](#). The classic [think-pair-share](#) technique, for example, is a low-investment, high-yield activity for a quick buzz of energy in the room, even if your course has large enrollment or is lecture-based. One of my favorite ways to capture energy at the start of class is simply “tell me something surprising you learned in our reading.” Aside from content-related activities, there is also significant value, and potential for re-energizing, through other kinds of check-ins, too.

Finally, consider that re-energizing your teaching doesn't have to happen in the classroom. [Re-energizing yourself](#) by re-framing routine activities might do the trick. [Connecting with other faculty and staff](#) for support and community can be key for well-being that follows into the classroom. More broadly, reflections about [self-care](#) from the early days of the pandemic still apply to our energy needs. For me, it's often a kind reminder to myself that a 10-minute walk just before class will help me bring more energy—and make for a much better discussion—than another 10 minutes of last-minute prep. Acts of self-care like these, after all, might be the most powerful tools we have, as they can move us a little closer toward the [collective care](#) we so desperately need. Hopefully, they can also help re-energize enough to remind us that it's not too late in the semester to shift the course of our courses.

About the author: Kayla Yurco is an assistant professor of Geography in the School of Integrated Sciences and a CFI faculty associate in the teaching area. She can be reached at yurcokm@jmu.edu.