A Pandemic Teaching Memo to Self Redux

By Paul E. Mabrey III

As we start a new academic year, dis-ease among faculty, particularly around teaching and learning, is what this Toolbox hopes to grapple with. It's important to note that this feeling isn't located necessarily within any individual. The frustrations about student disengagement, distrust toward Artificial Intelligence (AI), or feeling like we can't squeeze any more juice out of the proverbial fruit can be located within societal, cultural, and infrastructure concerns facing higher education.

The general dis-ease and excitement we are encountering this fall is new and a return of the old. The COVID-19 pandemic is not over, was never just singular, and highlighted or magnified already-existing implications to structural and societal norms, gaps, and opportunities. The CFI Teaching Toolbox archive demonstrate that old teaching strategies and reflections are more relevant than ever:

- Learning Students' Names 2023
- Pre-Course Questionnaires 2022
- Back to "Normal"? 2021
- Pandemic Teaching Memo to Self 2020
- Mid-Semester Feedback 2019
- On-Campus Now: Generation Z 2018
- Disability Discourse in the Classroom 2017
- The First Five Minutes of Class 2016

Past Toolboxes can help us as we prepare for the Fall 2024 semester. They can remind us that what we're encountering now many of us have already experienced. You may very well have your own teaching reflection memos, notes from class, pictures of whiteboards, and other planning/reflection documents that you can turn back to as we all prepare to move forward.

As I prepare for the coming academic year, as both someone teaching in the classroom and someone working toward supporting and improving institutional student success, I come back to a nexus point of multiple conversations on flexibility, accommodations, and student support that occurred at the end of the spring 2024 semester.

- Numerous articles were circulating among higher education news sources on faculty frustrations, student reading levels, institutional bandwidth and barriers, increasing accommodations needs, and more related to faculty and student success.
- Colleagues sharing stories about a new wave of student apathy and disengagement, their own growing apathy and frustrations, and a perceived lack of institutional or societal support for their role as leaders in the classroom.
- My own struggles in the Spring 2024 classroom as I encountered a new prep (SCOM 381 Rhetorical Research Methods) with diverse student expectations, motivations, and interests, and in a new role with a different sense of time than prior roles. Not to mention my attempt to weave things I was interested in (visual rhetoric and generative AI) into the class.

I have translated these reflections and toolboxes into a few focused strategies that I am integrating as we begin a new academic year. I am excited to try these this fall as I teach one of the first-year student success seminar sections, a new scaling up pilot between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs.

1. Name tents. I always thought using name tents in class seemed cheesy and very K-12, but I was wrong. Having a name associated with a face/person on Zoom was incredibly helpful. I also thought name tents were primarily for the instructor, but again I was wrong. A colleague in Student Affairs shared how helpful this was in one of their classes from a student perspective, being able to actually associate peers' names with a person. It was a small thing to help build classroom and campus community. Mid-way through the Spring 2024 semester, I tried it and loved it. Nothing fancy, just a folded up piece of printer paper. I loved it for me, for others, for making it easier to track who was physically present. Knowing and using names matters too. For example, a recent article shared that, for one student, only a dining hall staff member acknowledged and greeted them by name on some school days.

2. Supporting students might mean more limits for me, not more flexibility. I have certainly been that faculty member over the last fifteen years who didn't worry too much about late assignments, absences, screens in class, excused absence notes, leaving class to use the restroom, etc. Listening to an EdSurge podcast on fostering belonging in the classroom helped me recognize that what some students, and perhaps the rest of us, may need is more limits, not less. This may be particularly true for the students entering, progressing, and graduating from college right now as the pandemic experiences resulted in some learning limits being lifted so that students, teachers, faculty, staff, administrators, and families could survive the ongoing pandemics.

3. Experimenting with our relationships to screens. I will encourage and model limiting screen access during classes as part of a low-tech classroom environment. The evidence of the negative impact of mobile devices, laptops, and social media on learning, sense of self, relationships, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation is overwhelming. So much so that entire states are starting to work on bans at the K-12 level and the Surgeon General has recommended a warning.

Generally, I have let screens be in the classroom and tried to take advantage of them, when possible, for student engagement, group work, and workshop days. Moreover, they have been critical from an accessibility and inclusion lens, informally and formally through disability accommodations. Why did I change my mind? The studies shared in that podcast (starts at 37:10) demonstrated that banning didn't work and having peers share stories about limiting screen distractions in class didn't work either.

What worked in the study was being clear, transparent, and evidence-informed. They named the classroom as an academic learning community, shared evidence on and impact of inappropriate screen distractions, and shaped expectations for a policy against inappropriate screen usage, but explicitly saying there are no consequences to violating this policy. Not only did it work, students were no longer tempted and reported they were actually in favor of this approach:

> "Students said I love this. It allowed me to focus. It created the classroom community I wanted. It allowed me to be fully engaged. Every, every, every course should have this policy. They felt thankful that we had sort of taken that burden off of their shoulders. There's a sense sometimes that we have that radical freedom means that the individual gets to control everything. But what our students were telling us was that they felt more free when the context had constrained that behavior. Because now they were free to focus. They were free to engage."

4. Helping students with time and reflection. Arguably less controversial than banning cell phones in schools is the call to be more transparent about learning. Of course there is Transparency in Learning & Teaching (TILT), with JMU's own Center for Faculty Innovation (CFI) having offered workshops on this topic. Recent research suggests that helping low-income students understand how to structure their time and reflecting or trying to make meaning out of goals, purpose, and their own journey to/through college can improve their well-being and success. I have integrated reflection intentionally by better understanding student motivation and purpose, aligning with class curriculum, and explicitly making connections through classroom discussion and assignments, such as why learning rhetorical research methods may help them in other classes, in their careers, and as community members. I have not integrated structuring time much into my approach to teaching, but am excited about experimenting with it this year. Like TILT, even though the research on time and reflection demonstrated improvements for low-income students, all students would likely benefit from designing classroom experiences this way.

5. Well-being days. After reading and hearing about mental health days in college classes, I decided to try them out Spring 2024. For me, they signaled the value of well-being and particularly student/faculty mental health. And that it was okay for us to talk about it in class, during office hours, or via email. I shared this idea and then as a class we agreed upon the terms the first day. A mental health day was a day where we did not hold class, but students and I were expected to do something with that time that was for ourselves. Something that was not just using that time to catch up on class work (although was not policed or judged if students did use their time that way). All that was required was a brief paragraph describing how they used their mental health day. And I shared with the class how I used my mental health day too. Mental health days were used for spending time outside, physical activity, connecting with family, revisiting old hobbies, and more. Students mentioned these mental health days in both the formal and informal class evaluations. I will continue to reflect on and integrate them into my classes, but will likely change them to "well-being days" to align with the new and exciting well-being framework at JMU. Not surprisingly, mental health days continue to make their way into higher education articles and rank highly among items identified by students where faculty and institutions could better support student success.

Even in the first week of class, it's never too late to revisit those teaching memos, course planning documents, or colleagues and friends. They can offer insights, strategies, and feedback for designing our learning environments or easing the anxiety that comes with the beginning of the semester. Perhaps most importantly, they offer us what these strategies hope to offer students—opportunities for reflection, community-building, and even a path for transforming that dis-ease and disengagement to

joy. Thank you, Emily, for the opportunity to write this and being a thought partner in this work, and good luck to everyone as we begin the academic year!

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