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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Pandemic Teaching Memo to Myself

Pandemic Teaching Memo to Myself

by Andreas Broscheid

As another pandemic semester comes around and wreaks havoc with our teaching routines, I've found that I have to set some reminders for myself to go back to when the whirlwind of work makes it seem that nothing matters than the next immediate urgency. I didn't have time to embroider these insights on pillowcases (so much for summer plans). A listicle will have to do:

1. I'm overworked, overwhelmed, and freaked out. My students are likely to be more overworked, overwhelmed, and freaked out. Or maybe they're just doing fine. Who knows? I'll have to reach out and check in with them—in person, by email, through anonymous surveys, whatever works. Let them know that I care about their [well-being](#).
2. I'll have to focus on the essentials in my course: What is most important for students to learn? What are the central, inspiring, compelling questions that I want students to think about? What knowledge and skills should students definitely take away from the class? What things do I cover only because they're in the textbook? Everybody's bandwidth is limited this semester!
3. [As Cara Meixner reminded me two weeks ago, I need to keep affective learning goals and practices in mind. Practice care for myself and my students.](#) We'll all need it! And intellectual growth has to come along (and is often the result of) affective growth.
4. I love to geek out over new teaching tools and methods, but I'll have to focus on a few simple, reliable, and effective teaching methods and tools. It is tempting to try out all the Shiny New Things that I come across, but doing so will only overwhelm me and confuse students.
5. There is so much to read about teaching during a pandemic, and my reading list keeps growing faster than my reading time. Good news: I don't have to read it all. Or most of it. [Or any of it! adds Emily Gravett]
6. There is so much advice out there! Not everything works for me: Video lectures [are supposed to be up to 10 minutes long](#), but I noticed that, if I follow this advice, [the production process takes much too long](#). Longer, fewer videos (and less lecturing) may be good enough. More lower-stakes assignments followed by in-depth feedback are better than a few high-stakes assignments, but, with my other professional responsibilities, I simply may not have the time for too much grading or commenting.
7. Even though I just promised not to overwork, I am still committed to following principles of [inclusive and anti-racist teaching](#). This is something that I'll have to go back to again and again, reflect on, journal about, work on.
8. This semester will be chaotic. How will we adapt to physically distanced in-person teaching? Will livestreaming lectures through a doc cam work? Will there be an online pivot 2.0? Will we get sick? I need to be prepared to improvise; focus on what's essential (second point above) and what's simple and reliable (fourth point above); take a deep breath; and [adopt, adapt, and improve](#).

9. I need to give students input and agency. What questions and topics do they find essential? What are their preferred ways of interacting? What tools do they use to stay in contact with family and friends? In the past, I've found that they can tell me what works for them.
10. In a rush, I often end up lecturing too much. Reminder: I'll have to find ways to make my classes interactive, even if it's only in simple ways: [brief surveys or polls](#), [two-sentence "papers,"](#) [reflective paragraphs](#), and [other Classroom Assessment Techniques](#). [Canvas discussion boards are my friend](#) (and can be set up for small groups), Zoom (I hope we'll soon have a campus license) breakout rooms are my friends. I'll plan on [combining](#) individual activities (reflection, writing) with small-group work (pairs of students, for example) and large-group interaction.
11. I don't have to grade to provide feedback. In fact, I don't always have to provide feedback; student peer feedback can be part of activities, for example, in small-group discussions. I don't have to respond to every single discussion board post (I'll post this right above my monitor); instead, I'll provide summary take-home points or observations afterwards in a short video or email.
12. Maybe the most important point for me to remember: I need to stay in touch with friends, colleagues, frolleagues. Just because, but also to get feedback, advice, and new ideas. And I'll have to sneak into some of the (free! can you believe it?) programs offered [by my colleagues at CFI](#) and [Libraries](#).

What does your own beginning-of-semester listicle look like?

The wild ride that's this year continues. Let's hang in there and make the best of it. Best (of all possible) wishes for fall 2020!

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<https://www.jmu.edu/cfi/teaching/other/teaching-toolbox.shtml>
