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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Diamonds out of Dung

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## Diamonds out of Dung (with apologies to geologists)

by Andreas Broscheid

What a year this was! It feels like just last week we were getting ready for Spring Break, and now we are slowly emerging from the ugly whirlwind of 2020. I don't have to recount in detail all the pivoting, innovating, and improvising that happened (add your favorite ing-words here). The constant Zoom meetings. The friendly, the critical, and the angry discussions. The desperate multi-tasking. The feeling of failing our students, our colleagues, our family members. The persistent fear caused by navigating a pandemic in a country that did much too little to protect the health and lives of its people. The commitment to making our institution, community, country a more inclusive, less racist place in all of this. And, again, our failures. And the amazing successes that also happened (like [this](#), [this](#), and [this](#)).

Looking back over the CFI's 2020 Teaching Toolboxes, there have been several threads that reflect this year's experiences. One of those threads is about how we deal with failure and catastrophe as professionals, but also as whole persons. Already in January, my friend and colleague (aka "frolleague") Emily Gravett noted our [need for intellectual and professional humility](#), in part because we don't always get to choose whether we can exercise humility—the circumstances may simply humiliate us. Emily followed up in May with a meditation on how, in the midst of catastrophe and failure, we can still [find joy](#) and joys that sustain us. More practically, Peter Eubanks joined Emily to [offer suggestions on practicing self-care during a pandemic](#). And, in November, Daisy Breneman not only [noted the need for love in our work](#), especially this year, but also showed what this could mean in practice.

Another thread, or maybe a yarn?, was focused on providing resources to help us keep the learning in online learning, in a situation that gave us hardly any time to learn how to do so. Emily kicked this off by writing about [helping students make the transition to online learning](#). There were Toolboxes on [designing discussion boards](#), [pandemic syllabi](#), and [pandemic final exams](#). Others focused on [helping students manage COVID-19 stress](#), [trauma-informed teaching](#), and, well, the title says it all: [Hybrid, Hy-Flex, Hy-Stress](#).

Another connection between Toolboxes could be drawn along anti-racist and [inclusive pedagogy](#). Joshua Rashon Streeter, in that context, suggested that we [return to the work of Paulo Freire](#) and provided ideas for [creating classroom dialogues around race](#). Considering the contentious and polarizing election, Emily and I collaborated with Carah Ong Whaley of JMU Civic on tips for [teaching around the election](#).

While most of the Toolboxes were written by CFI faculty or faculty associates, this year gave rise to some notable and valued guest contributions. I just mentioned Carah Ong Whaley. Liz Thompson, of JMU Libraries, wrote about [finding and using open educational resources](#). And John Almarode, in the College of Education, offered us a more theoretically grounded but no less useful [focus on distance education](#). (I

also just learned that John is one of this year's Virginia State Council for Higher Education [SCHEV] [Outstanding Faculty Awards recipients](#). Congratulations, John!

Looking back at all of these Toolboxes (and others—you can [re-read them here](#)), one thing that strikes me is that even in the midst of crisis upon crisis, we find intellectually vibrant and invigorating community around teaching and learning, thinking and theorizing about learning, and helping each other succeed—or maybe, online, survive.

Another thing that strikes me is this: I think, in many ways, we all feel like failures now. This was a traumatic year, and we did not have the time, resources, and preparation to provide the teaching and learning experiences that we would have wanted to provide. When this feeling is particularly acute, I try to remember the Toolbox that I found most fun to write this year, about a [punk approach to education](#). It reminds me of the fact that things don't have to be perfect, and that things often go sideways and we just need to go with it. Or, well, we shouldn't have to, but we simply do. And then I remember that, even if I wasn't able to cover as much content as I normally do and had to cut some corners (while adding other technological corners as well), I am pretty sure that the students in my class probably learned much more this year than in other years, just as we faculty did. It may not be what we wanted to learn, and we would rather not have had to learn it, but here we are! And we ended up doing quite some amazing things—diamonds out of dung!

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For more information about the CFI's Teaching Toolboxes, please visit:  
<https://www.jmu.edu/cfi/teaching/other/teaching-toolbox.shtml>