

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Digital Pedagogy (Part I)

by Elaine Kaye and Jessica Del Vecchio

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In the summer of 2020, I (Jessica) turned to Instructional Designer [Elaine Kaye](#) from JMU's Libraries Digital Projects Team for assistance in putting my courses online. In this two-part Toolbox, we discuss our partnership and how Elaine helped me to see that critical digital pedagogy (CDP) could improve those courses, in both their online and in-person formats. In this first part, we address how a partnership with an instructional designer works. In Part II, which will be out in two weeks, we talk through the tech tools I used in my classes.

JESSICA: I teach in the “Theatre Studies” area in the School of Theatre and Dance—meaning I teach courses in history, analysis, and theory rather than the more “practice-based classes” like acting, directing, or design. But, as a theatre professor, I work in a discipline that holds precious live, in-person experiences. (The notion of in-person liveness as a defining characteristic of theatre is contested, and pandemic-era online productions dredged up [a decades-old debate](#) about the ontology of performance.) Though I did not face the same challenges that my colleagues responsible for more performance-centric courses did, I felt extremely anxious about the prospect of losing the in-person aspects of teaching when my courses went online in Fall 2020. In my courses, I often ask students to do in-class presentations and to work in groups to make and present pieces of performance based on historical models. Fearing how those assignments, in particular, would translate online, I decided to reach out to JMU Libraries for help.

ELAINE: As one of the instructional designers in the JMU Libraries, I was supporting our faculty and students in many ways during the Spring 2020 “pivot” to online instruction. My focus during this time included providing A LOT of one-on-one feedback and consultation (which I also do in “normal” times, but usually with a focus on course design across modalities as well as the implementation of digital projects). As an Instructional Designer, I have shifted my approach as the field continues to grapple with [what it means to be an instructional designer](#) and as I continue to develop my own “eclectic” practice. My work with faculty (and really anyone) centers care and trust, because, in the end, to support faculty as they explore new pedagogical strategies, as they wrestle with the incredible challenges we are all facing, and as they reflect on their ways of being as instructors, we have to trust each other to do this transformative consultation work. ([Charles Feltman defines trust as “choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person’s actions.”](#)) So, with care and trust at the core, I (like many instructional designers and faculty in the CFI) start all of my consulting relationships with an initial meeting to conduct a needs assessment, to explore and listen and really get to know the faculty member. I want to hear all of the concerns, questions, successes, and challenges. Honestly, learning about so many different courses in disciplines from across the university is one of the best parts of my job! I get to learn from faculty who have both incredible passion and

expertise. The first meeting with you, Jessica, was no exception! It was a great consultation and we began our conversation in one place, then, through our dialogue, we were really able to articulate your needs and make a plan.

JESSICA: Coming into my first meeting with you, Elaine, I wasn't sure what to expect. In our initial email exchange, I claimed I wanted to "think through my assignments," but what I really wanted was someone to reassure me that teaching online did not mean tossing out everything I've learned in all my years of college teaching. I didn't understand what it meant to make my courses ["hybrid" or "hyflex," and I had little knowledge of the best practices for online teaching](#). I knew there were ed tech tools that might make online courses more engaging, but I wanted guidance on which ones were best suited for my needs. I have never been a technophobe, and I have used technology in my teaching—for example, having students keep blogs in a play analysis course, asking them to use technology to deliver presentations on technological innovations in the theatre, and using the [VOCAT web application](#) to comment on student presentations—but it has never been a major part of my pedagogy.

ELAINE: Your comment about technology not being a major component of your pedagogy is really important for me. In my work with faculty, I'm adamant about not centering technology, but rather centering the challenge faculty and students are facing, the pedagogical needs of the discipline, and the consideration that teaching is inherently political work. [Critical digital pedagogy](#) (CDP) gives us a solid lens through which to question, consider, explore, and test out the role of various digital tools in our classrooms. You already had a strong background in critical pedagogy and your curriculum, assessments, and pedagogy were already shaped by active learning, amplifying all voices, and focusing on information literacy and research as tools for critical thinking. So, the next question was to consider what was working and what challenges were you facing; this is where making space for conversation becomes so important.

JESSICA: I really appreciated that you started by listening. You served as a font of pedagogical wisdom, but also as a kind of support system, someone with whom I could talk through my ideas, and, later, the successes and failures of those ideas. I described my courses, my objectives, my assignments in depth. I voiced my anxieties about [managing a lecture course using Zoom](#), and my fear that I would not be able to establish the classroom community that I felt was necessary to make my courses successful.

ELAINE: It is really meaningful and helps me do my job when faculty can be honest and vulnerable about a fear, so your concerns about classroom community became a touchstone for our work. Our conversations always began with me asking: "What's the purpose of this assignment or this activity? What's the goal? How is this connecting to course outcomes? What are the learning objectives?" If you work with any instructional designer, these will certainly be familiar questions (think ["backward design"](#)). But they became the guide posts for determining how to craft each assignment, devise each activity, or make other design choices. Then, based on our identified goals, we can consider if technology could support you and your students.





JESSICA: Before suggesting specific tech tools (which we will address in Part II of this Toolbox), you offered me some ideas for rethinking my course structure. You recommended breaking my theatre histories course into units, each with the same number of classes, so that the students could easily understand what was expected of them on each class day. This was a revelation to me!

ELAINE: A clear course structure is important in any class, but it becomes even more crucial as our modalities become blended, flexible, or fully online. (Here's [a great resource on online course structure](#).) The structure of a course communicates so much more than just content to our students—a clear course structure communicates care. (See the [Transparency in Learning and Teaching Project, or TILT](#), for more information.) It supports our students by decreasing their cognitive load and makes a course more accessible and equitable. (For more on clarity of online course structure, see [John Almarode's Toolbox here](#).)

JESSICA: Yes! I loved that I was able to make the course structure really explicit from the first day of class. I came up with catchy descriptors for each day in the unit (explore, engage, experience, and expand) and little symbols to coincide with them (a magnifying glass, a head with a lightbulb in it, an audience sitting in a theatre, and a two-headed arrow) that I included on my syllabus and on our PowerPoints. See [Daisy Breneman and Andreas Broscheid's Toolbox on the pros and cons of graphic syllabi here](#).

Structure of the Course

Most of our units will consist of class days in which you will:

-  Explore: These class sessions will feature an interactive lecture through which we will explore the theatre and performance traditions from a particular time/place.
-  Engage: In these class sessions, we will delve deeper into one specific aspect of a period's theatre and performance—for example, its acting theories, its theatre architecture, its staging techniques, etc.
-  Experience: For these class sessions, you will read and/or watch a performance from the period and discuss it with your group.
-  Expand: In these sessions, we will reflect upon the larger issues of representation raised by the theatre and performance traditions of the time and place under study.

JESSICA: Each unit consisted of a lecture, which provided an overview of the performance tradition and its historical context; an in-class activity that emphasized one aspect of the performance tradition; a small group discussion of a performance text; and finally, a contemporary application of the issues raised by the unit. Each day had a corresponding

assignment: an answer to a question that addressed the lecture's main idea; an (often creative) assignment due at the end of class; responses to several questions about the performance text; and annotations on an article and a "journal entry" in which students thought through challenging questions about theatre practice today.

ELAINE: Besides helping students to remember what assignments are due when, were there other benefits that came from using this structure?

JESSICA: Patterning the course in this way helped me to spend more time on each unit, ensuring that students came away with a comprehensive understanding of the performance in a particular time and place before we moved on. Each day of the unit focused on building a different skill and therefore achieving one of the course's objectives. For example, in each unit, students had to closely read and analyze a performance text; read and understand a complex theoretical argument; and apply what they learned about history and theory to their own contemporary context. Patterning the course in this way meant I had to cut some stuff from the syllabus, but trading coverage for depth was worth it to me. This new structure helped me achieve my DEI goals as well, giving equal weight to Western and non-Western performance traditions, [rather than tokenizing non-Western traditions](#) by devoting only one or two class periods to their study.

ELAINE: These are such great examples of the results from implementing a framework like CDP that centers equity in our curricular choices. I also really appreciated our conversations about what your students needed to engage with complex material; you focused on centering their needs, scaffolding content, and making space for community building. Was there anything in particular that challenged you about implementing this change?

JESSICA: Well, I had to let go of some of my [instructor-centered teaching techniques](#). I was very nervous about not leading a full-class discussion of the plays and performance texts, but instead, leaving it up to small groups to discuss the plays on their own. I quickly realized, however, that this structure made the students responsible for their own learning. They appeared to be far more engaged in the analysis, doing it themselves, than they were sitting in a 40-person class and listening to me offer my take on the plays. The groups also helped students to stay connected to their classmates despite not being in the same room together.

ELAINE: I'm so glad you shared that! It can be really challenging, but it's such important work. If we are really considering how we can [humanize online learning](#) and center care in our teaching, we must question our place of power as instructors in the classroom (definitely a [tenet of CDP](#)). I think the changes you made really supported the creation of spaces of community building and transformation— *which is what we identified as a need from the beginning of our time together*. So, what are you taking away from this new approach?

JESSICA: The remarkable thing is that this structure was so successful that I kept it in place when I went back to teaching in person this past fall. It worked beautifully. Far from centering technology, CDP helped me to re-center students!

About the authors: [Elaine Kaye](#) is an instructional designer (Assistant Professor, JMU Libraries) who is interested in critical instructional design, critical digital pedagogy, open pedagogy, curriculum design and development, equity-based teaching, and social justice pedagogy. [Jessica Del Vecchio](#) is an assistant professor of theatre in the School of Theatre and Dance and a faculty associate in the teaching area of the Center for Faculty Innovation.