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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Dog Days of Summer

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Dog Days of Summer

by Kayla Yurco and Daisy L. Breneman

This toolbox is dedicated to Loki, Thor, Jax, Tripp, and all the other animals that make our lives whole.

The suggestion for this toolbox topic originated, first, as a diversion—a distraction, really—from the hustle of the academic year. In some ways, the suggestion wasn't so surprising; dogs are actually major contributors to the CFI teaching team. Their frequent appearances on our Zoom meetings often bring much needed energy, smiles, and zen to our team. They keep us company while we program. We pet them when we feel low (or happy—okay, we pet them *all the time*). They help put things in perspective for us.

Additionally, we recently marked [National Puppy Day](#) and later noted [National Pet Week](#) was coming up (who knew?). One of our dogs had a (highly anticipated, highly celebrated) birthday in between. We thought about how our dogs (and pets, more generally) bring a lot of joy into our lives and what they can do for our [health](#). Through all of this, we continued reflecting on how the last few years have really stretched all of us—in academia and elsewhere—especially related to the ever-elusive notion of [work/life balance](#) and wellbeing.

The truth is, we realized, dogs have a lot to teach us. Since this is a Teaching Toolbox and since we're wrapping up one academic year and thinking ahead toward [CFI's May Symposium](#) and Summer and Fall courses, let's talk—with a bit of [workplace levity](#) for the [end of the semester](#)—about what they can teach us about teaching:

- One lesson we learned in training (okay, *attempting* to train) our dogs is the power of repetition. We know from research on humans that [repetition improves learning](#) of concepts and skills, so it's important to equip students with opportunities for reviewing materials; practicing [research](#), writing, and communication skills; and more.
- Did someone say [fetch](#)? Don't just give information—let students go get it! Allowing students the opportunity to practice retrieving information and answering questions (through things like Canvas quizzes or [Kahoot](#)) has a positive impact on learning ("[the testing effect](#)").
- "Good dog!" [Positive reinforcement](#) works (as long as it reinforces, rather than interferes with, [intrinsic motivation](#)). [Punishment](#) sometimes just generates shame and resentment. It's important to demonstrate consequences of actions, and guide students to more effective ways

forward, but we can do so in positive ways like...

- ...TREATS! Those of us with food-motivated dogs understand the power of a Pup-Peroni. Find out what [motivates](#) your students, and find ways to support them.
- [Squirrel!](#)
- But, seriously, dogs, and we too, struggle with attention and focus, especially in the past few years. To support students' attention and focus, we can use [microlectures](#), whether online or in-person, and [break up](#) class time by [chunking](#) content, activities, or tasks. Such strategies serve as a universal design feature, particularly benefiting [neurodiverse students](#), but also supporting the learning of all.
- Dogs are IN their bodies. They let their emotional and physical needs be known through their bodies—the wag of the tail, the scratching at the door, the nose in the food bowl. Paying attention to our bodies and needs (and [students' needs](#)) is important to learning. Don't overlook [embodied cognition](#) and the power of the body and [movement](#) in learning. We, and our students, aren't just "[brains on sticks](#)," so try incorporating practices such as [whole-brain teaching strategies](#).
- Play! As our dogs might say, go after that tennis ball, leap on the table, chase each other, do zoomies around the yard, go for a walk. In the higher education classroom, [games](#) and play can have [many benefits](#), including increased connection to course material and reduced stress.
- Similarly, have fun. Dogs are silly, and they know how to use that silliness to engage us. Indeed, we know that gentle [humor in the classroom](#) can better [engage students](#), improve their learning, and build a welcoming environment. (It turns out that [animal-related meme-making assignments](#) work, too.)
- But don't forget to rest, too. Dogs know when to just snooze and let the world pass by. When they need rest, they rest, unapologetically. In fact, our dogs often look at us early in the morning with eyes that say, "Wait, not yet! Sleep more!" Their behavior is a good reminder for us (and our students) about the importance of [rest](#) and [sleep](#).
- Believe people when they express needs. A dog doesn't wonder if you really need to plop down on the couch right now—they get down there with you. Likewise, when students, or colleagues, express [care](#) or [access](#) needs, we can be with them too.
- Relatedly: care, deeply. Dogs have [an inherent empathy](#). Whether we feel joy, sorrow, ennui, or whatever, [they feel right along with us](#), and sit, cuddle, or otherwise [rescue us](#). They soak up the pain, magnify the joy, and let us feel. We can do that for our students (and our colleagues!) in many ways, including through [trauma-informed pedagogy](#), [checking in](#), prioritizing [care in the](#)

[classroom](#), and spending time talking about care needs and strategies. And as a campus community, we can work together to design spaces that welcome and support students holistically, such as [the BioCommons](#).

- Gaze out the window. Dogs understand the benefits of accessing a little dose of nature by looking outside, even if they can't go outside. Whether in our offices, classrooms, or meeting spaces (if we're [lucky enough](#) to have ones with windows), reap the benefits of window-gazing on [well-being](#) and [productivity](#), and invite students and colleagues to do the same.
- More broadly, be in the moment. Savor the little things—in the way one of our dogs savored that birthday pupcake made especially for him, or the feel of grass on little paws. One easy idea to do this? Encourage your students to visit the on-campus [The Serenity Center](#) (especially during stressful times, like finals weeks).
- Dogs know, and bring, [joy](#). Help your students remember the joy of learning. Try to remember it yourself. Teaching can be hard. Many of us are exhausted and feeling [burnout](#). But learning, discovery, growth, and, yes, teaching, can be [joyful practices](#) too.
- (Try to) be the people our dogs think we are. What a world it would be if we were! Dogs love unconditionally, greet us enthusiastically, and bring out our best selves by their unwavering belief and trust in us. Let students, and colleagues, know you believe in them, too, and that you support them and want the best for them. [Positive relationships lead to better outcomes](#), for faculty and students alike.

Despite certain [ethical](#) and [social justice](#) questions around pet companionship, dogs can play crucial roles in our [wellbeing](#) and offer us (whether we have them or not) valuable inspiration and lessons. More broadly, there is a lot to learn from the rapidly growing field of [animal studies](#). Among other themes, [critical animal studies](#) contributes to discourse on [animal welfare and justice issues \(for humans and animals\)](#) and helps many of us find meaning in our lives. Indeed, the field (and the animals around us) can help us consider (Western) society's [anthropocentric](#) tendencies and move us toward rethinking our [responsibilities](#) to—and perhaps our wonder and awe for—the nonhuman world.

With the *tail* end of the semester here, [Earth Day](#) just behind us, and [summer dog days](#) on the horizon, it seems a particularly good time to appreciate the nonhuman, whether through academic, animal studies-inspired approaches like [multispecies ethnography](#), recreational activities like [meditating outdoors](#), or simply snuggling up with our animal friends, if we have them. Indeed, by practicing [humility about the nonhuman world](#), [we can learn a lot](#), especially about what it means to be in relationship with this beautiful world—both for our students and ourselves.

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