

Hitting Pause: A Toolbox for Fall Break

by Daisy Breneman
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One of my favorite holiday specials is [A Muppet Family Christmas](#) (1987). In one scene, Kermit the Frog is talking with his nephew, and notes that if not for holidays, opportunities to pause, then [“life would just pass by in a blur.”](#)

As we approach Fall Break, even though we have tons to do as faculty—prepare the second half of the semester, catch up on grading, perhaps take care of some service or scholarly activities—let’s also use this moment to pause. There is a lot of [power in the pause](#). As the band The Head and the Heart reminds us, though the world is spinning, [“just for a moment, let’s be still.”](#)

Let’s use this pause to make sure the semester isn’t just passing by in a blur, as they so often do. This might be a good time to do some [reflections on the semester](#)—but also, an opportunity to consider our own goals, for ourselves and our students, and reexamine our purpose during this pause.

Pauses are empty spaces—but they aren’t just waiting to be filled. They are, in and of themselves, valuable.

Sometimes [pausing a relationship](#), for example, is the only way to save it. Sabbaticals are long pauses in teaching ([or other work](#)) that can support productivity—taking a break from parts or all of our work can make us better at our work. Pauses we take when sick might help us recover; pauses in student loan payments might help people meet financial goals and be in better positions to repay in the future. And, in so many ways, the [pauses the pandemic](#) forced, though painful, helped us better prioritize the things most important to us (in some cases by removing them).

Pauses can move us forward.

When they return from Fall Break, we can also help students learn to take advantage of the pause, to reflect, to refresh, to breathe. For example, we can use [contemplative pedagogy](#) as an approach to teach students the [power of mindfulness](#), and specific [mindfulness practices](#). Many faculty find that devoting a few minutes of class to quiet centering, [presence](#), or [gratitude](#) activities can help students focus on learning.

We can also talk to students about the [power of pausing in communication](#). Sometimes taking time to think before replying to an email (especially if it’s a potentially heated conversation) can be incredibly important. We might consider having policies such as “no emails within 24 hours of a grade release”—encouraging students to first answer their own questions, and, if they’re upset about the grade, time to reflect and process.

Most of us understand [the power of the pause](#) in our classes, including [the importance of wait time in class](#), which serves many functions, including making sure students have time to formulate thoughts or questions.

We can also make sure we're spreading out readings and other assignments to offer students time and space they need to be successful—and human. For example, pausing content during the week of an exam or big project can allow students to focus on their work. [Rice University](#) offers some resources to estimate how much time it will take for students to complete work in our classes, which can help us prioritize and be realistic about what we're assigning. Being [overloaded](#) and overwhelmed is not conducive to learning ([for anyone](#)).

It's also important, especially in stressful times, to encourage students to take breaks. We can model this ourselves by setting firm [boundaries](#) around our time and energies (for example, "I don't check email after 5 or on weekends" or "allow two business days for a response"). We can also build in breaks in class time, especially during longer classes; take breaks to [check in](#) with students; and even have some "downtime" between units in class. We can communicate to students that we all need breaks—[short ones while studying](#), but also building in longer ones, and making the most of semester breaks, weekends, holidays, and more. There's value in working breaks, of course, especially when accomplishing some real good, such as through [Alternative Breaks](#). In whatever form, or length, time away from normal rhythms and routines can be powerful.

We all need time to [just breathe](#), and just be. Pauses are necessary for our health and wellness, and for community building and connection, as we renew and [re-energize](#) ourselves. This Fall Break, let's all pause, and spend some time focusing inward, so that, when we return, we can all be even stronger members of our [communities of care](#).

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