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Subject: Special Edition Teaching Toolbox: Hybrid, Hy-Flex, Hy-Stress: Teaching Under a Rock

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## Special Summer Teaching Toolbox

### Hybrid, Hy-Flex, Hy-Stress: Teaching Under a Rock

by Cara Meixner

For weeks, I have been waking up in the middle of the night, gasping under the weight of an elephantine sensation. In a state of semi-cogitation, I muse, “There is a boulder sitting on my chest!” No matter how I shift or struggle, however, the large rock remains, unwavering.

As I begin to come to, exiting the liminal space of semi-sleep into wakefulness, I find myself calling forth language to describe the raw, constrictive heaviness that I invariably begin to recognize as a figment of my overactive dreamscape. These rocks embody anxieties and apprehensions: I am sick with worry about my eldest son, who chose to attend a residential college this fall. I am not doing enough to upend the proliferation of a [“triple pandemic.”](#) I do not specifically recall turning off the oven after dinner. I am overwhelmed by the unrelenting number of items on my to-do list. I feel incompetent in my attempts to [balance caring for my children with the seemingly untenable demands of my academic job.](#)

And, for me, who loves, adores, and takes pride in teaching, this particular rock especially bruises: I **really don’t know how I’m going to teach in the fall.** Somewhere in my anxious brain, this translates to: I really, really, really don’t know how I’m going to manage 2.5-hour hybrid sessions while: donning a face covering, maintaining physical distance, managing technology, Zooming-in distance learners (while attending cheerfully to those students ten feet away from my plexiglass shield), and trying, amidst all of this, to invite (and centralize) [inclusion](#), [rigor and compassion](#), [humility](#), and [transparency](#) in the classroom.

As a faculty developer and creative pedagogue, such panic is hardly aligned with how I have come to see myself as an instructor. For as long as I can recall (which harkens back to playing “school” with cousins at my grandparents’ home when I was 8 years old), I have enjoyed a prowess in teaching not easily manifest in my scholarship or service. Whether teaching [critical service-learning courses](#) held in community spaces or redesigning tough, gritty research methods courses, I find myself most alive as an instructor when I am with my students in the physical space.

The more I voice these worries noted above, whether with members of the CFI team or with a trusted cadre of fellow faculty and department heads, the more I come to see that my “rocks” seem to be the proverbial elephant in *all* of our spaces. We are asking ourselves, and each other: How do we teach [hybrid and Hy-Flex courses](#) amid what is most certainly high- (or hy-) stress? How do we preserve the integrity of our learning outcomes, our signature pedagogies, and our beloved activities amid chaos, uncertainty, and duress? As colleagues, how do we support our students, each other, [and ourselves](#)?

My opinion, which departs civilly from some faculty developers who I respect tremendously, is that the “how to teach?” questions cannot be answered by one-shot workshops *alone*. I appreciate that workshops, like those offered by the CFI and Libraries, have a pertinent and central place in pedagogical development; they’re important gateways for idea acquisition and community building, often more accessible to busy faculty than multi-day institutes or learning communities. My contention is with the quick-fix approach, which, not unlike post-holiday diet plans, is all the rage. By Googling “Hy-Flex” and “pandemic teaching,” for instance, I found myself saddled with enticing prospects, including those from predatorial groups promising a magic wand, for the mere price of \$199. Even innocuous [“quick and easy” guides](#), while helpful to many, leave my head spinning with an unnerving bounty of “what if...?” questions. And, sadly, these “easy” guides seem to oversimplify what it actually takes to teach this way during a crisis.

Even teacher-scholars who initially advanced the “Hy-Flex” model [are baffled by how it will work](#) amid our current situation. One expert, Betsy Barre of Wake Forest, calls it “a kind of 1990s distance learning” exploited by colleges and universities to guarantee physical distancing. Hy-Flex, as I have come to learn from [this superb podcast](#) with creator Brian Beatty, is a thoughtful, equitable approach to course design that honors learner variability (i.e., offering learners the option to choose which modality, face-to-face or online, will work best for them). Further, the Hy-Flex approach values online agility, as not all distance learners can participate synchronously, given network access issues, among other barriers. To Beatty, the pre-pandemic Hy-Flex provides “ways to support those kinds of students or students in those situations [who need to exercise] legitimate choice.” Though he opines Hy-Flex could work amidst COVID-19 circumstances, he cautions against the sorts of quick fixes that disadvantage learners and lead to “double-preps” for faculty.

All of this in mind, what is one to do? As a psychologist with a background in counseling, fortunately, I have a nifty kit of tools, like [cognitive reframing](#), that I use to redirect angst, confusion, and apprehension. As described in this [Psychology Today](#) article, “Reframing is not denial that the challenge that we have been dealt is a difficult one. Even though our circumstance may be fraught with hardship, we can learn to trust the cycles of life.” Such wisdom helps me to channel my energy from “I really don’t know *how* I’m going to teach in the fall” to “I may not know *precisely* how I’m going to teach or manage the many obstacles ahead, but I *do* know who I am as a teacher, how to bring what I value about learning into the classroom space, and ways to design components of a creative, well-aligned course” (thanks to initiatives like CFI’s own [jmUDESIGN](#)).

When I’m consulting with fellow faculty and unit heads about fall courses, I recognize that the same tools and tenets harvested in these 1:1 or small-group conversations are the ones I *most* need to apply to my own circumstance. Explored below, these tenets, when exercised, may cultivate connections, instill hope, de-escalate anxiety, and re-center us as teachers capable of instructional wizardry, no matter how hard the Hy-Whatever circumstances may feel or be.

**1. Name who we are as teachers.** Asking who we are as teachers (i.e., [how I teach who I am](#)) is an affirming, grounding exercise, particularly during perilous times. By calling attention to who we are, we enact [the power of a strength-based intervention](#) that allows us to focus on where we do shine, versus where we could fall short. And, yet, attention to our teaching vulnerabilities is still apt; we are advised to lean into our fears and failures. Parker Palmer, credited with the notion of teaching *who we are*, explains: “Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse...Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror, and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge—and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject.”

In other words, naming who we are as teachers means knowing who we are in the context of our strengths, spheres of growth, and areas of resilience. I may not have experience instructing in a Hy-Flex setting (nor may any of us, for that matter), but I do know how to grace my learners with appreciation, sensitivity, and thoughtfulness. Reclaiming these gifts, situating them in a [compassionate teaching](#) approach, has prompted me to consider what I could capably do between now, the start of the semester, and during the semester itself. Accordingly, I penned and emailed a welcome letter to my students and attached to a [pre-course survey](#), providing them with the opportunity to share who they are and what they may need, from me *and* each other, to feel successful this fall. Unsurprisingly, the respondents noted the same concerns that plague me nightly. What they most need is flexibility—not the kind manifest in the Hy-Flex model, nor the sort that forsakes a rigorous experience, but the kind that attends to who they are [as whole people](#).

**2. Center affective goals in the classroom.** Many university courses are content-centric; this first shows up, for our students, in the lists of [cognitive outcomes](#) featured in course syllabi. Yet contemporary educational development scholars, like L. Dee Fink (see this [helpful handbook](#)), remind us that significant learning experiences hinge on [affective outcomes](#) too. Emily Gravett, of CFI and Philosophy & Religion, recommends another great resource, [The Spark of Learning](#). In fact, affective experiences (e.g., receiving, responding, valuing, appreciating) create conditions for learner and community inclusivity while deepening students’ cognitive gains. Such grounding is also linked to trauma-informed pedagogies, which I explored in an [earlier Toolbox](#).

Again, reframing provides a saving grace. In lieu of losing (more) sleep wondering how students will grasp psychological statistics amid chaotic environmental conditions, I can shift to posing another curiosity altogether: How might I canvas a more central part of the learning environment (i.e., student motivation, needs, and interests) to leverage their learning of complex material? Part of the answer is to share ownership of course management with my students, allowing them to [co-develop course guidelines](#), provide feedback on what is and is not working, and make choices about course assessments. Together, we have the opportunity to centralize and affirm affective goals that build support and motivation for robust learning, regardless of our modality.

**3. Slow down.** A natural partner to the above is [backward course design](#): begin with an overarching vision for the course that inspires the development of cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes that

are aligned with appropriate assessments and pedagogies. Let's face it, though: even in pre-pandemic circumstances, thoughtful course design took the kind of time that few of us can measure, now, in [the COVID time warp](#). Cue the calm, refreshing voice of London-based instructor Jamie Thom, sage author of [Slow Teaching](#), who opined in this [podcast](#), "Far too often we're looking at the speedy, quick fix of things rather than considering the reflection, the pace we need to do things in order to make learning gains." [Teaching slowly also means dialing back our expectations](#), like moving away from the desire to create "masterpiece lessons" that pack in the content that I described above, or cajole us to make our first-ever hybrid course perfect.

Teaching slow is also a well-documented pathway to ensuring our own sanity. Thom was first drawn to the notion after paying attention to his own burnout as an instructor, which led him to attend more thoughtfully to the drain he witnessed in his colleagues. [Self-care for faculty](#) is hard enough in a global crisis; slowing down our approach to teaching may save us in the long run.

For me, slowing down will entail using one or two compelling questions (rather than a bevy of topics) to frame the weeks of my course, each forming the learner's pathway toward a capstone assessment. Such questions, like "Why is it so easy to lie with statistics?" (which maps to a learning outcome where students differentiate causation from correlation), will be linked to timely low-stakes assignments (e.g., find a news headline that suggests a statistical fallacy, identify what the fallacy is, and rewrite a better headline) related to data integrity amid the impending election, triple pandemic, and more.

Since I began writing this piece, which took initial shape in my private journal and made it into the little league of blog-space, my sleep has improved mildly. I have reframed the visage of teaching *under* a rock to an image wherein I am teaching *with* the rock. (My [friends of eutierria](#) would say, "Cara, just be one *with* the rock." I'm not there yet.) To me, teaching with the rock means reclaiming my prowess as a teacher by teaching who I am. The "what if" and "how so" questions linger, as do areas of discontent. But I know now where I have the power to enact change and co-create a learning environment that matters for my students and me. Such is the beauty of [lifelong learning as a teacher](#).

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