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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Reflecting on Revising Courses

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Reflecting on Revising Courses

by Kayla Yurco

Earlier this academic year, I passed my five-years-at-JMU mark. My [gratitude practice](#) has me reflecting on the many privileges this history affords me. It also has me reflecting on all that's changed since I arrived here (for me, at JMU, in the world) and on what I've learned since my [New Faculty Academy](#) days, especially as an educator. I had taught quite a bit in graduate school before coming to JMU, but there was still a learning curve to adjust and build curriculum for program needs here. Now, many of the things that were once very new about designing and implementing courses at JMU have become somewhat routine as the number of total sections I've taught here has passed well into the double digits.

Indeed, more seasoned educators know this better than I: teaching a course the tenth or twentieth time is different from teaching it the first, second, or even the third time. (As a lifelong runner, [marathon-not-sprint](#) metaphors feel relevant to me here.) When I first started teaching, my prep hours felt consumed with the seeming never-ending-ness of finding timely [open access](#) readings, building new assignments, and designing engaging classroom activities for different student populations. There was always something to do just to get everything up and running.

Of course, generous colleagues and the plethora of resources (including from [the CFI!](#)) helped, including those for [planning a course I hadn't taught before](#) or helpful tips and tricks for what to do [before the semester starts](#). But now that many of the courses in my rotation are, in fact, up and running, I'm thinking differently about if, how, and when to revise them. For example, I want to keep materials fresh for my own sake, but I don't want (and truly don't need) to reinvent them every semester. I also want to keep coursework responsive to external events and meet students where they are, but I don't want to [burn out](#) along the way. I don't want to miss opportunities for pedagogical improvement while I'm lost in the [minutiae of grading](#) and day-to-day lecture prep, but I need to get those things done, too.

Part of the appeal of teaching, I think, is that improving and innovating is its own kind of unending journey. But that journey can be exhausting. (It also turns out that there are other seemingly endless demands on our [time](#)). As I continue to think about maintaining my courses in terms of personal and professional endurance, I'm learning I need a few signs, mile markers, and rest stops along the way.

Specifically, I've been looking for concrete strategies for something in between initial [design](#) and complete [redesign](#) to help guide a process for sustainable, ongoing, and in-the-moment course revisions—strategies that don't require full overhauls, but that do allow for materials and assignments to

be reused, recycled into something improved, and/or occasionally thrown out. Here are two of my favorite strategies so far:

1. **Utilizing easily adaptable [instructional design templates](#) to map out modules, weeks, and/or Canvas sites.** Visualizing [the sequencing of a course with grids](#) is a helpful way to design new courses; now, understanding each class day as its own 'unit' helps me think about feasible revisions, when necessary or desired, in small chunks over time. In the past, I've experimented with simple tables in Microsoft Word and Google Sheets as well as old-fashioned whiteboards with post-it notes. For now, I've settled on [Trello](#) boards because they're easy to copy and modify across course iterations (and free to use). In my boards, each square—a single class day—has three components: materials assigned, in-class activities (e.g., lecture topics, discussion prompts, or group activities), and resources (mostly links and content refreshers for my benefit). Assessments stand out with colorful labels on the squares. Squares can be rearranged in future semesters to account for days off, special events, and more. And, perhaps most importantly, there's plenty of space to keep notes for myself (more on that below).

Besides their organizing potential, these templates serve other purposes: they can effectively support our ongoing work to incorporate [Universal Design for Learning](#) (UDL) into our teaching. Grids and templates might help us with [a few starting points](#) for incorporating UDL principles into our courses, such as implementing the [+one strategy](#) (adding one new way to share content, one new activity for students, or one new assessment option) to improve access in our courses piece by piece. Design grids can also help us to zoom out and recognize that improving equitable access to education is an ongoing process and a form of [engagement](#) rather than a reductive checklist.

2. **Keeping a [teaching journal](#).** A teaching journal (or course diary) can take a variety of forms, but ultimately functions as a reflection space, method, and tool for thinking through pedagogical strategies, processing teaching-related challenges, and collecting questions for future choices. The [benefits](#) are many, including opportunities for prioritizing teaching objectives, unpacking student responses to specific material, developing professional skills, archiving successful (and less-than-successful) efforts in the classroom, and even recognizing signs of stress or potential for burnout in one's work. They can pair well with [student course journals](#), and, as qualitative data, they can lead us to explore and contribute to the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning](#). And they might even help us in our end-of-year narratives, evaluations, or applications for awards, promotion, and more.

A few years ago, before I had heard of teaching journals, I implemented an informal version: just spending an extra three or so minutes after class to write down how things went. I keep a

running document of course notes that I can edit semester to semester, and, at the end of each class period, I tuck a few observations at the beginning of that day's notes so I'm sure to find them next time. Months later, sometimes I'll find that my past-self was really specific ("That video link no longer works! Find a new one") or stern ("Review XYZ more next time before trying to lecture about it") or helpful ("Reread p.47-51; that section stumped students and they had a lot of questions"). I might note a question or two that students asked if they sparked helpful conversation or illustrative examples. Sometimes I'll find that my notes are sarcastic ("The majority of students are now too young to know ABC. When did that happen?") or confused ("This article REALLY did not land like last time. Why?") These are not so much directions for myself as they are open questions that I plan or hope to think more about...later.

When I'm feeling more intentional, instead of stream-of-consciousness notes, I ask myself similar questions I ask students during [check-ins](#): (1) what worked well today/this week/this module?; and (2) what could I have done differently to better help (my students or myself)? The simplicity, however informal or formal, can be helpful: a quick reflection and, perhaps, a quick action item for next time around. Others might take notes on a copy of their syllabus for future iterations and/or on printed lesson plans during or after class. Thinking long-term, these journaling practices can help with general [professional and personal development](#).

There are certainly other strategies out there for revising courses, including ones to help with significant [redesign](#) or more [consistent updates](#). And adaptable planning templates and teaching journals can be just two strategies for holistic [reflective teaching](#) more broadly. Finally, as always, there are plenty of resources within the CFI (including an [archive](#) of helpful Teaching Toolboxes, workshops and programs like the [Inclusive Teaching Institute](#), and one-on-one [teaching consultations](#)) to support faculty at all stages of teaching, designing, and revising.

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