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EDITORIAL

Making Up for Lost Time

—Benjamin D. Jee

Dear readers of *Currents in Teaching and Learning*,

For many of us, fall 2021 marked a return to the classroom after more than a year of remote instruction. I began the semester optimistic about the chance to reclaim the physical space of the classroom, and to draw on the intellectual energy of my students, live and in person. And, indeed, it felt good to be back. However, I quickly realized that the return to the classroom was also shadowed by a cloud of uncertainty—about what to expect from my students, whether and when they could attend class, and how to adjust my plans when our circumstances changed. I had naively assumed that I would find my groove—the “new normal”—but came to understand that, in reality, there was no predictable routine to fall in to. From conversations with my colleagues, this was one reason why the past semester of reentry was perhaps even more challenging than the year before. Despite its drawbacks, remote instruction was generally predictable and controllable. The once-familiar classroom now felt like anything but.

Colleagues across a number of colleges and universities also remarked on the “learning loss” that was apparent in students’ performance on routine tests and assignments. The effects of a remote year—and of the accumulated stress and hardship of an ongoing pandemic—came into focus. Of course, these consequences have been felt at all levels of our education system, and around the world. In a study of student performance on national exams in The Netherlands, for example, researchers found that students learned little while taking classes from home, especially those students who were disadvantaged from the start (Engzell et al., 2021). As the authors of the aforementioned study point out, The Netherlands is perhaps a “best-case” scenario, owing to its equitable school funding, and high levels of Internet access. In the United States, the pandemic has disproportionately affected those from racial and ethnic minority groups (Roman et al., 2021). As we come to grips with the educational fallout of the remote year, we are reminded that many pre-existing inequities not only remain but have worsened.

Reflecting on my own teaching, I often faced the dilemma between making up for lost learning on the one hand, and, on the other, accommodating students’ legitimate (and continuing) challenges; in a sense, between pushing harder and pulling back. I can’t say that I resolved this dilemma. In the end, I tried to meet my students where they were, and to help them make progress toward their individual goals in my courses. I adjusted deadlines, provided opportunities to revise assignments, and placed more weight on effort and improvement than on sheer quality of performance. I still worried about learning loss, but I also worried about losing students entirely, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds who bore the brunt of the pandemic.

As we all have grappled with countless pedagogical challenges over the past many months, I have come to appreciate more fully the scholarship of teaching and learning. Access to new ideas, rigorous evidence, and useful teaching resources is immensely beneficial. I am grateful to be a part of a journal that speaks directly to the needs of our current moment in higher education. As always, I hope that you find the present issue of both inspirational and useful as you confront the pedagogical challenges ahead.

The present issue of *Currents* contains a number of thought-provoking pieces. In the article, “Knowing Who’s on Your Team: Pedagogical Expertise and the Impact on Software Design” Catrina Mitchum, Nicole Schmidt, Kayle Skorupski, and Rochelle Rodrigo examine historical and other factors that determine the digital tools adopted by educators. They advance the argument that subject matter experts should be involved in the design of educational software, and discuss how expert-informed software can improve teaching and learning, using the example of students’ peer reviews of written work. By facilitating students’ exchange of ideas, peer review can be made both more meaningful and more manageable through the right digital tools. In another thoughtful teaching reflection, Viranga Perera discusses ways to harness students’ interests in a science

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course for nonmajors. Perera's article, "Our Moon: A Multidisciplinary Course to Develop Students' Interest," describes how students incorporated their individual skills and interests into creative projects about the moon, including the moon's significance in cultural traditions, the history of the lunar missions, etc. Perera generously shared the online course materials with readers, and encourages instructors to use and extend this work.

Engaging students' critical thinking is a goal in every course. In "Encouraging Critical Engagement with Course Readings Through Focused Reading Responses," Laura Kane describes how *focused reading assignments*—writing prompts designed to elicit students' critical engagement with a text—can be used to improve student learning from course readings. By providing structure to students' responses, this approach also facilitates instructor feedback, streamlining an often-daunting task in writing-intensive courses. In "Flipping the Classroom in Project and Team-Based Learning: COVID made me do it!" Courtney Kurlanska discusses how highly-interactive student activities can be transitioned into online and hybrid formats. Kurlanska grappled with this challenge in spring 2020, which involved a sudden pivot to online instruction, but draws broader lessons and insights from the experience. In "Using the Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching to Guide Assignment Design and Implementation," Christine Martorana highlights the importance of cultural responsiveness in teaching. Martorana describes the visual snapshot journal assignment, which empowered students to make personally meaningful connections with an academic text. Martorana provides examples of students' work that attest to the benefits of this culturally responsive approach.

Each article in the present issue explores ways to increase students' meaningful engagement with course materials and with their classmates. Yet, even the best pedagogical plans can unravel if students become distracted or disinterested. In their review of James M. Lang's, "Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It," Aleel Grennan and Daron Barnard present some of Lang's research-based suggestions for cultivating students' attention in the classroom. As they discuss, distraction is not a byproduct of the digital age, nor is it unavoidable, even in remote learning environments. Given the myriad demands on students' attention—and our own, for that matter—a deliberate approach to attention management could enhance the effectiveness of our teaching in any context.

As we embark on another semester under the shroud of the ongoing pandemic, I hope that you find encouragement and inspiration in the scholarship of teaching and learning. I thank all of the authors for contributing their work to the present issue. I am incredibly grateful to the reviewers, copyeditors, and members of the *Currents* advisory board who have devoted their time and energy to the journal. I appreciate Jonathan Tegg's assistance with updating and improving the *Currents* website. As always, Dr. Linda Larrivee has supported the journal every step of the way, and is constantly working to improve all that we do. Finally, I thank you and all of our readers for supporting *Currents*. I look forward to another year with you.

Until next time,

Benjamin D. Jee

References

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