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Make the Kind Choice



**A brief history of teaching, learning,
and surviving the pandemic
through emails to college faculty
2020-2021**

Gina Rae Foster, PhD

*This collection is dedicated to our faculty, students, and staff who live,
teach, and embody justice*

Preface

At the beginning of March, 2020, the spread of Covid-19 seemed quick and inevitable. We did not know how to contain or prevent contagion without isolating ourselves from human contact. Workplaces prepared for rapid transitions to remote activities. Schools discussed how education, K-12, college, and higher and more specialized levels, would continue. On March 9, 2020, my son was sent home from his school in New Rochelle, and the next day his school district moved to lockdown and asked parents to be patient. On March 11, scarcely 24 hours later, someone tweeted that CUNY would also be shutting down within hours.

Official notice had not reached our emails or even the emergency notification systems. And yet the collective panic and confusion were easy to anticipate that would embrace most teachers and students: we were entering unknown, deadly environments with no certainty about what was ahead and when we would be able to see each other face-to-face, unmasked, as we were in this moment.

For many years, I had called on a combination of training and practice in community and family resilience, cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural teaching in public higher urban education, and social justice grounded mentoring skills to introduce new approaches to teaching, mentoring, and learning and to establish vibrant learning, service-oriented communities. In the few hours that I felt dwindling between the informal tweet and the official announcement, I envisioned a weeklong series of emails to faculty that would draw on these experiences and tested methods to provide a resilience- and social justice-informed pedagogical psycho-social intervention. A framework emerged, followed by the pacing of two emails per day, morning and afternoon, to remind faculty of their commitments and capacities and to model practical pedagogical steps that could be included in most disciplines at varying levels and class sizes.

The first email was drafted and ready to send within minutes of the university notification, and I was fortunate throughout the pandemic to email the faculty email listservs directly. Over the first week we were given to prepare our courses for remote teaching and to reach out to our students, the emails continued, even over the weekend when many of us were continuing to work. Requests came from other support services to have their information added and to be counted among the audience for these messages.

As I hit the Send button, each time I felt tremendous anxiety about how these emails would be read. It seemed to me that this was the proper work of a teaching and learning center in these times, to take the role of mentor and guide and to reflect back to our community its strengths and possibilities.

I was met with an extraordinary response from our faculty, some of whom shared these emails with colleagues at other institutions where they also taught. In the initial weeks, I was told the emails were being read to staff in one office at the State capitol. And yes, there were requests to be removed from the audience for these messages, yet no one demanded that I stop writing or

sending the emails (at least, not to me directly). I will hold back from including specific praise or anecdotes in this work meant for the wholeness of others, and I will say that I feel deeply honored and touched by so many of my colleagues' responses.

“Make the kind choice,” was a phrase in an early message, and I have chosen this for the title. This is what we do at our best, making choices that stem from kindness, strength, vulnerability, and our love for being present with actions and values centered in the humane. Throughout these emails, which stretched to one per week and then one per month, I have opened myself to listen, reframe, and lift up who and how we can be at our most fulfilled. At our most immersed in learning.

In preparing this collection as a guide, my purpose is twofold: to give us opportunities to revisit a desperate time when we were thoroughly flawed and yet more than capable of teaching and learning with our students and colleagues, and to offer these tips and principles for instruction that were hard won by so many of us before the pandemic and continue to inform us as we shift with health dangers, climate catastrophe, and the social injustice that infuses both.

Where possible, I have removed references to college-specific resources and events that were included with the original emails. In a few places, I have retained or corrected links that seem to call for recognition.

I encourage readers to use this guide for multiple interests and needs: as an informal and partial teaching guide, as an edited historical artifact, as a developing set of perspectives on social justice, and as a reminder that our individual and collective wellbeing can be reciprocal, can be intensified. To my beloved John Jay faculty and to all the students, teachers, and educators I've been graced to learn with, thank you for reading, for being the inspiration for writing, and for making your own resilience and justice manifest.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gina Rae Foster". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a vertical line extending downwards from the end of the name.

Gina Rae Foster
August 26, 2022

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Stability and Community

March 11-29, 2020

Your Week Ahead: Making the Teaching Transition Work for You and Your Students

Dear Colleagues,

My most positive thoughts for your wellbeing, safety, health, and serenity go out to you. In this time of tremendous anxiety and crisis, we represent hope and security for our students and their communities. There is much we have to be and do for them while attending to our own needs. This email is intended to guide you through the next week of making changes to your teaching as you prepare to teach through distance methods (or to modify those already in place). Please be prepared for ongoing emails from me with resources, tips, and news related to YOUR teaching and the learning of YOUR students. I invite you to consider this next week as your own personal teaching and learning “bootcamp” in which you focus intensively on the task and accept the need for rigorous, energetic, structured activities in order to achieve your goals. I encourage you to keep the principles of Stability (consistency, balance, groundedness) and Community (connections, interactions, shared goals) in mind as you approach this transition. As inspiration, I am outlining what you might do each day:

Day 1 (March 12): Reflection and Harvesting: Rather than dive right into moving your class to a distance format, use this day to reflect on your students and courses so far this term. Email your students and ask them what they are feeling and what they most want to stay consistent about the course. What do you know about your students? How are they responding to your course and each other? Any successes to build on or challenges to address? And your courses: what’s working? Any glitches? Are you on track with your syllabus and plans? Most importantly, what are the central, most consistent activities and objectives in your courses? Take notes and look back at your materials to fill in details. Take a look at the “Teach On!” guide and the consultation options offered by DOES, TLC, and the CUNY Continuity Slack team.

Days 2 & 3 (March 13 & 14): Prioritizing and Framing: Now that you’ve reminded yourself of your students’ needs and your courses’ possibilities, spend these days prioritizing what you need to do to keep your courses consistent while they “live” online. Use these priorities to establish the frameworks for your remainder of the term courses, making sure to build around the central, most consistent activity and objective you identified on Day 1. Consult the “Teach On!” guide shared via email and social media for support in creating your frameworks. And join the CUNY Continuity Slack team to connect with faculty and faculty development experts across CUNY ready to assist you. Please remember that DOES and TLC are available for consultations.

Days 4 & 5 (March 15 & 16): Building the Basics: Now you can focus on building the basics into your courses: resources, activities, and pacing that aligns with your syllabi. Make sure your basics include information about accessibility and accommodations, language that reflects the wide range of student identities and needs present in your courses, and resource information should your students be food-dependent, housing-dependent, internet access-dependent, or have other

needs our Student Affairs offices can address. Again, please reach out for resources and consultations as needed, with DOES, TLC, and the CUNY Continuity Slack team.

Day 6 (March 17): Filling and Polishing: You're making incredible progress! Day 6 gives you time to add more content, instructions, and tech tools to make communications and activities more engaging and consistent. Check that you have peer activities set up to keep students connected and interested and that you build flexibility in for missed assignments and technical difficulties. By the end of today, you may be close to completing your course transitions or have achieved this. And please, touch base with DOES, TLC, and the CUNY Continuity Slack team as needed.

Day 7 (March 18): Proofing, Testing, and Sharing: You've just completed or nearly completed a terrifically complex assignment. Proofread your work as if preparing for publication. Test the tools and mentally test the activities and instructions. Fix what needs fixing. Then share the course with your students, making sure to walk them through the course in an introductory email as well as through attaching a document to your course containing instructions or an introductory video (if you feel confident in creating this). Invite your students to offer feedback and point out any gaps or errors. Addressing these now will save you much time and frustration later.

That's it! If this is helpful, great. If not, I trust it will spark counter-plans to keep you motivated and moving in the time we have.

Please feel free to email me with questions and requests for consultations. I'll try to respond within half a day if not much, much sooner.

Be well. Be whole. Be safe.

Gina

Shared Questions and Self-Care

My dear colleagues,

At the end of what has been a hectic and demanding day for most if not all of us, I want to check in with you. How are you? How is the first day of the remote transition affecting you and your students?

Thank you for reaching out with comments and questions, if you have done so. And thank you for the many reassuring and empathetic communications you are engaging in with students and peers.

May I remind you of the Hippocratic oath that medical students take upon graduation? “First, do no harm.” This is sound advice for our teaching and at present, in our decisions regarding conversations with our students and changes in our courses to make remote methods of instruction work with our needs. I might amend this to more positive language: “First, make the kind choice.”

Many of you may wonder if others share your questions; here is a short list of those I’ve received in the past 24 hours:

1. What do we do for students with no or limited access to the internet and the technologies (computers, smartphones, software) they need to continue with classes?
2. How do we continue to accommodate students with disabilities (e.g., hearing, vision, mental health)?
3. What do I do if my internet access and technologies aren’t reliable, available, or up to date?
4. How can I get help if I need hands-on, step-by-step help understanding Blackboard at a beginner’s level?
5. How can I move my course to remote teaching and learning if I’m already overloaded and overwhelmed? Are there more reasonable expectations and advice for those of us with extremely limited time (and energy)?

If you recognize any of the above questions and are grappling with the answers, rest assured we are working on both the facts and the practices. We will resolve these together, with the many staff and faculty experts here at John Jay and across CUNY. Please stay tuned. To wrap up, let’s consider self-care. Please cover these basics with yourselves:

- Drink plenty of non-caffeinated, unsweetened fluids.
- Make good choices about what you eat, and eat regularly. //
- Prioritize sleep and letting your minds and bodies rest and recover.
- Give yourself permission to take breaks.
- Make conscious choices to wait 5, 15, or 30 minutes before responding to communications that trigger strong emotions. This is a volatile time.
- Do less. Focus more.

- Be kind to yourself and others in speech and action. Have a restorative and heartening evening.

Thanks for being the good people you are.

Until tomorrow.

Emailing Students and Setting Priorities

Dear Colleagues,

Whatever the time zone or level of activity you are in right now, let's take five minutes (5) to consider two issues for the day ahead: 1) communicating with your students and 2) prioritizing your course transition moves.

Emailing our students each day is essential during this initial phase between the term that is moving on predictable lines and the term that will be more fluid. When you first email your students, please contact them as a group and ask them for a brief response so that you know they are checking their email and have access. Please be sure to reassure your students that you have a plan and they are included in every step of your thinking. Please invite questions and let students know when you are likely to respond. Please refresh your students' memories of your courses by reminding them of a recent topic or activity. And please activate your students' resiliency by reminding them of a recent shared success in learning. All of these will assist you in maintaining and building the community you need for the weeks ahead. Now, priorities are clearly individual and need your sense of what works for you. At the same time, here are a few tips about what you might catch and release.

1. **Start with the center.** The center is your students. What are you confident they can maintain with emails and 1-2 hours of internet access per day (this assumes they have internet access, which we will address this afternoon)? Start discarding plans for communications that fall outside this zone.
2. **Now for study time.** Most students will have less study time, if they are home with family or roommates, because the distractions and demands for attention will increase. Be mindful of asking your students for 1-2 hours of time PER DAY as a maximum.
3. **As for assignments,** teamwork will depend on access to phones and the internet. However, lectures take sustained time and undistracted attention, which may not be available. A limit of 5 minutes, give or take, on videos and 10-15 minutes on reading at a time may be a helpful framework.
4. **Finally, grading and feedback.** When is it reasonable for you to be available? Through email, Blackboard, other technologies? What will guide your grading? Meeting objectives, time and effort, showing progress? Think through what limitations your students may have on responding to assignments and try to let go of what they can't do in the current circumstances while giving more weight to what they can make happen.

Frameworks, Weekend Plans, and Shared Questions

Dear Colleagues,

Frameworks are stabilizing. They set limits to what can be done and provide cues for organization. Frameworks are also conceptual. Our values and belief systems are frameworks. Let your values help you decide what you keep and prioritize in the transition, and let the organization you had in place guide how you organize the course going forward.

Shared Questions: *What do we do for students with no or limited access to the internet and the technologies (computers, smartphones, software) they need to continue with classes?* The Library remains open for its regular hours and has computers and internet access available for students. Please check the library website for details. Additionally, the computer lab in L2 NB allows students to borrow laptops while they are on campus. However, they do not allow students to borrow the laptops for extended periods of time outside of the campus. There may be additional options: please continue to check your emails for information.

How do we continue to accommodate students with disabilities (e.g., hearing, vision, mental health)? All essential services are available at the college, including Counseling, the Wellness Center, and other student support offices. The Disabilities Office can advise on accommodations. These FAQs from CUNY may be helpful: [note: the original link has been replaced with this resource: <https://www.cuny.edu/current-students/student-affairs/student-services/disability/>]

What do I do if my internet access and technologies aren't reliable, available, or up to date? If your home internet access is not working, please contact your internet provider to resolve the issue. If you do not have access to smartphones, laptops/tablets/desktop computers (only one is needed), contact DoIT for assistance and consider visiting the college (if you do this under other conditions) and public libraries to use the free machines during the times they are available. If your equipment is too old to support the current versions of Blackboard and Microsoft 365, or any other software and platforms you believe are essential to your teaching, I regretfully and respectfully suggest finding ways to upgrade or use someone else's machines. How can I get help if I need hands-on, step-by-step help understanding Blackboard at a beginner's level? Click on this link to set up a virtual appointment with DOES instructional designers. They will work with you gently and supportively to make it happen. Also, if you know faculty in your department who use Blackboard confidently and skillfully, reach out to them to see if they might volunteer an hour to demonstrate their knowledge. Peer mentoring makes the difference.

How can I move my course to remote teaching and learning if I'm already overloaded and overwhelmed? Are there more reasonable expectations and advice for those of us with extremely limited time (and energy)? First, take a deep breath. And then another. You are in excellent and well populated company. Then, think about your course or courses that need to be moved.

Is it possible that your expectations could be scaled down while continuing to support student learning? Can you use email (assuming everyone is reading and responding to email) and a central online storage place (Blackboard, Google Drive, Dropbox) to hold assignments and resources? Now, for meetings, do you want to try Collaborate, Zoom, Skype? Which would cost you the least time to learn and set up? Try these three tips and take some more deep breaths. You can do this. You are doing this. It can be simple and stunning.

Weekend Plans The last few days have been dizzying and demanding. This weekend, please plan to take a break, for at least 15-30 minutes, and imagine letting go of the worries, the obligations, and the expectations (as well as the conversations filled with friction and the frustrations of not having needs met). Do what works for you, and take this time to let go. Please plan to follow your typical weekend routines, as you can, with families and spiritual communities, with yourself and those you love. Be safe and follow advice about social distance and cleanliness, please. And live in your environment as much as you can. Please trust your choices. If you want to be alone, value that. If you need community and connection, make it happen and safely. If you want to work on your courses, please keep going. And if you know you need to protect your weekend from extra demands, that's okay. We are going to be ready even if our courses aren't perfect and the first few days are off-balance. We are going to be okay.

Self-care: Please connect with your communities and let yourselves be human.

Let's continue to be here for each other and true to ourselves.

Warm regards,

Frameworks and Priorities: Our Students Need Us, NOW

Dear Colleagues,

Good morning!

Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays are days many of us use differently, for religious observations, for family and community activities, for work and rest and self-education: these days find their meaning in the value we attach and how we use them. In many ways, weekends provide the frameworks and priorities, leaning on values and boundaries to create our senses of who we are.

There are parallels to be drawn here to our current week of building and rebuilding towards remote teaching and learning. We are making individual choices about our time and efforts; our students are also making these choices. From experience, we know our decisions depend on each other, teacher and student, regardless of the student voices we invite into our courses (if you know me, you'll know I believe in inviting students to speak often and passionately). It has always seemed obvious to me that students must be involved and must be influencers of course frameworks and priorities.

If you've been following these emails, you may remember my asking you to email your students. Many of you have done this: thank you! What you have been missing behind the scenes are messages from your peers telling me that their students are not responding or are doing so in small numbers. Based on past experience, I thought this was largely due to students not checking or using their John Jay emails.

Last night I learned that we have a new crisis: many of our students are withdrawing from courses and in some cases dropping out. The uncertainty of moving their learning to remote processes and interactions is daunting. Facing the pandemic with their loved ones, their jobs, and their futures at risk, changes to their academic routines may be more than seems manageable. I'm sure many of us can empathize.

And, we are here for them. We teach at John Jay because we believe the present and future lives of our students are critically important to our global future just as we believe our students' individual lives are critically important in classes and office hours and recommendation letters and referrals and difficult conversations. We must keep this sense of being present for the courses we are transitioning. And we must keep this sense of presence alive NOW as we work to keep our students with us. Let's make this our shared priority.

Please consider joining me in the following two actions:

1. Reach out to the students who HAVE been communicating with you and ask them to reach out to the students they know and encourage them to stay and to trust us. This will broaden the outreach across courses.

2. Use your social media accounts (if you have them) to post outreach messages to your students (keep it simple and positive) and to like, tag, repost, retweet, and share messages from the college and your peers.

Our frameworks include and rely on our students being present. Our priorities include and rely on our students being with us as we teach and learn.

Let's make this happen. Let's start now.

Until tomorrow (and I'm checking email all weekend).

Building the Basics: AWARENESS, ACCESS, ABILITY, and ACTION

My dear and dedicated colleagues,

Would you please take a moment to name three great things that have happened with you since Wednesday (big or small)? And then would you please take a moment to settle into yourselves and how you're really feeling in this nanosecond? Thank you. Let's share the reality.

Today, we're stepping into Building the Basics, starting to fill in our frameworks and mold our previous course content into our new course containers. If you've been teaching online or hybrid, the challenges are likely not to have been shifting your courses but keeping your students on track as they respond to the break for their face-to-face classes and the overall anxiety in the news and social media as well as their personal lives.

I'm a strong believer in structure (if you've seen my desk, you'll know why), especially for learning. When students are provided with structured activities and assignments, they spend less time trying to understand what to do and why than actually doing the work that makes the learning happen. And, structure has the benefit of creating limitations to push against, which tends to provoke creative problem-solving and capacity-building.

In today's email I'm offering you structure + resources + tips that I hope will be useful along the same lines. Try this rubric: AWARENESS, ACCESS, ABILITY, ACTION. Let's make sure our students are AWARE of what's happening, have ACCESS to their learning, can maximize their ABILITIES to learn, and can take ACTION that's effective based on our guidance.

Please note: The Optimum/Spectrum offer below has been verified. The Blackboard and DOES videos are just what we need (and they have more!).

Tomorrow, we'll go through other resources for student wellbeing that need space on your syllabi and your distance spaces.

ACTION (achievable assignments, realistic deadlines)

- Provide context and make transparent connections to learning objectives.
- Use bulleted or numbered lists for instructions.
- Lay out assignments in small, connected steps.
- Refer to specific moments in activities, assignments, and discussions that relate to the current assignment.
- Offer a weekly date for clarifying instructions and affirming progress.
- Set assignment deadlines for the same date and time each week (e.g., Thursday, 11:59pm).

- Set up a discussion thread, Google doc, or other shared writing space for students to post questions, comments, and suggestions. Respond to these 2x each week on the same days and relatively the same times.

*Assessment and grading will be discussed in future emails.

Summing up:

Structure helps us feel:

- Calmer
- Steadier
- Readier

In building our basics for previous courses, we've often been designing for ideal situations. Let's design for flexible and creative ones instead.

Warm and safe thoughts,

Building the Basics: DEPENDENT, INDEPENDENT, INTERDEPENDENT

My dear colleagues,

How has your day been? Many of us are beginning the quest to balance teaching remotely with homeschooling, reorganizing our personal spaces into office-like activity sites, and managing household tasks. We might be starting to mourn the loss of research time or wondering if social plans will reappear by May. And, most of us are focused on our students and the changes in our teaching that will hold them with us and their future plans.

Today I've reconnected with the TLC staff, all students, to plan our remote work. They shared a variety of experiences with their instructors as well as a great deal of uncertainty about the coming weeks. I reassured them that we too are feeling uncertain and will be discovering these new spaces together. And I asked them to do what I've suggested to you: reach out to their peers and encourage them to stay with their courses.

Several of you have written today with questions, and I am reaching out across the college and university for answers. When we get to the end of the week, I'll sift through my emails and start categorizing the inquiries so that we can share information more coherently.

For now, let's remind ourselves of what it means to be dependent, independent, and interdependent and how these qualities might be useful to consider in our teaching. When we begin a course or new concept or skill, we have some expectation that our students will be dependent on us for explanations and modeling. As we develop the learning content, we encourage our students to become more independent, thinking and looking for answers on their own. And yet, the nature of a class is interdependent, with a reciprocity between students and instructors that enhances capacities and understanding for both.

Thanks for all you do, each of you. Would you please take time for a few slow breaths and then time to note what you've done the past week and done well? There is much left to resolve; we are much readier for a successful semester after all you have done.

Be well. Be you. We are more than capable.

Filling and Polishing: SIMPLIFY, HONOR, and RESPECT

My dear colleagues.

Thank you for the many positive and supportive emails. I am particularly encouraged by messages from faculty who have volunteered their time and expertise to help others.

Well done.

We are moving into polishing and filling our remote courses. It's a day for adding content and instructions and making adjustments, remembering to continue to add resources for students as we design and as we learn more from the college and each other. It's a day to be deliberate and slower than we might like, letting the urgency add to our focus.

To continue polishing and filling, I am sharing a request from President Karol Mason:

“We should aim for simplicity of access for our students, and not mandate synchronicity. As we discussed this morning on our call, faculty should be very flexible about the delivery of assignments once we convert to distance learning. There will be access issues and learning curves. Faculty also need to be sensitive to the privacy concerns of our students in their home environments.” Karol Mason

This statement comes in the midst of a discussion of student responses to a technology survey, in which many indicated serious difficulties with access to and use of technology as well as their own anxieties about learning new systems and maintaining safety in their personal lives. Below I have offered a list of questions for each element in Karol's statement. Please take a moment to read these and reflect while you prepare for Thursday.

For each component of your remote course, please test against Karol's requests above (which reflect UGS Dara Byrne's and CUNY Vice Chancellor José Luis Cruz's communications about our students):

Simplicity of access:

- What do students need to do to access the course and the assignments?
- Do they need internet access?
- A computer or laptop?
- A smart phone?
- Software such as Microsoft Office? Apps? Data storage?
- If a student is sharing a family smart phone and using a hotspot, how might that influence their participation and performance in the course?

Synchronous/asynchronous:

- Are you requiring your students to meet you virtually with everyone in the class present?
- Are you offering synchronous office hours?
- Can students continue participating and succeeding in the course without any real-time, synchronous contact?

Flexibility of deadlines:

- Which of your assignments, activities, and exams have deadlines?
- Do you have windows of flexibility for your deadlines (for example, how late is too late)?
- Do you have alternatives for students who are unable to turn in the required work yet still want to participate and complete the course (think about students without access to word processors or who have increased obligations due to the changes in circumstances)?
- What phrasing and tone are you using to communicate deadlines?

Access issues:

- Do your students have access to devices that will connect to the internet and support the software and apps needed to participate and succeed in their classes?
- Do your students have reliable access to the internet? Sufficient cellular data?
- Do your students know how to log in to Blackboard and other technologies you are using?
- Do your students have uninterrupted access to the devices they are using for classes (do they share these devices with others, are they using public spaces to find access)?

Learning curves (and the range of these):

- What does a student need to know to find their remote classes?
- What guidance (instructions, links, videos) are you providing to help students learn how to access and how to navigate their remote courses?
- What contact information for college support do you have to assist students in learning how to participate in your course (Blackboard, word processing, internet skills, webinar interactions, working across multiple technologies)?
- Are you communicating with your students regularly? Are you mindful about writing simple, specific instructions?

Student privacy (video, audio, email, chat, anywhere they or their information might be exposed):

- Where will students be participating in video and audio interactions?
- Will students be able to participate while respecting the privacy of others in their environments (remember, many of our students are immigrants and DACA and have safety concerns)?
- Will students' information be protected? How? (images, recordings, text)?
- Have you reviewed the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) recently to remind yourself of the additional protections students must have under federal law?

Many thanks, and apologies for the lengthy email.

Be safe and well.

Filling and Polishing: ACCESS and ACCURACY

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for being persistent, innovative, and above all, committed. We are nearly ready to reunite with our students and courses and relaunch the term.

This afternoon, our suggestions for polishing and filling your courses are practical, focused on what you will be doing online. Please modify these suggestions if you are not using Blackboard or are using different activities and methods than those listed below.

As you transition your courses to distance learning, please keep in mind that simple and small work best. We have tagged each of these points to match this morning's email categories:

- Keep in mind that students are not set up with the same connectivity and not all students can meet virtually through the various web conferencing tools available. *[access issues]*
- Posting your materials and assignments along with clear instructions on the learning management system, Blackboard, can help you to get started. *[simplicity of access]*
- You do not need to rely on web conferencing to lecture at a distance. If you choose to narrate over powerpoint, we strongly recommend you do so using a screen casting tool like <https://screencast-o-matic.com> - a free screen recording tool, and post the link to your course. *[simplicity of access]*
- While each course has considerable capacity for online materials and assignments, please do not upload videos directly to the course. You may get an error message if the files are too large and you do not know if students have the ability to download the video to view it. It is best to link to a video housed elsewhere, such as youtube.
- Remember to "chunk" videos and materials. Multiple short readings and videos are more digestible online. *[learning curves (and the range of these)]*
- You can use Bb Collaborate or Zoom to offer virtual office hours. *[synchronous/asynchronous]*
- You can recommend that students share contact information with another classmate as a study-buddy or group students to help each other through the course. *[learning curves (and the range of these)]*

Proofing, Testing, and Sharing: WHAT'S NECESSARY & NOW

Our dear colleagues,

Thank you for staying with your students and each other this past week. Thank you for staying with me and trusting this process.

Today is our day to step back, pull up into our strengths and certainties, breathe in, and hold ourselves ready to risk the weeks ahead. There is a sense of approaching the starting line of a race (for some of us, this resembles the Paralympics; for others, a triathlon) and remembering that form and stance matter more than sheer force of will. I ask you to join me in this mindset today as we engage in proofing, testing, and sharing.

We ask our students to proof their work before turning it in, and this is fair to ask of ourselves. However, given our circumstances, the proofreading that seems most necessary might be dedicated to those areas of your redesigned courses where errors most matter. Reminding ourselves that some corrections (many) can be made along the way with student input, we can think about which instructions students will first encounter and which connections (read links as well as logic) need to work to guide students between prompt and activity.

I (Gina) suggest that we plan to include students in making corrections as they are most likely to find what isn't working. Rather than leave this to chance, you might intentionally invite them to work with you, even awarding extra credit for those who find errors and suggest workable fixes (note the 2-step process). This allows you to test the course as you go, after today's focus on making sure the first week to 10 days of remote learning are as sound as you can make them.

We will reach out this afternoon with additional brief tips and reassurance. Until then, we send our belief that you will be ready and that you are more than capable. Thank you.

Be safe. Be well.

Proofing, Testing, and Sharing: MUTUAL & FLEXIBLE

My exhausted, resilient, amazing colleagues,

You are doing this. You are ready or nearly ready. And you are a community that has connected and supported its members ever more deeply this past week. Thank you. I am inspired. And grateful.

Tomorrow I will wrap up this series of emails; Judy and I will be in touch less frequently, with resources and recommendations, starting next week. Thank you for joining me; I am touched by the many responses and by the faith many of you have placed in me.

Before we officially begin our classes tomorrow, let's think through sharing. Sharing, this evening and through the next 10 days, includes

- exchanging information and course and college resources with your students and peers
- exchanging strengths, positive discoveries, and affirmations with your students and peers
- setting and knowing the boundaries for yourself and your students about appropriate boundaries for sharing (What is too personal? Too negative? Not relevant to your shared goals and time?)

Proofing and testing your course and mutual learning will be ongoing. First, be kind. Adapt when you can, keeping your learning objectives and ethics at the center of decisions. Second, be partners. Invite students to help create new norms for engagement and new approaches to keeping the course on track and productive. Third, be progressive in your mindset. Rather than starting from and maintaining perfection, start where you are and aim to be better, as you are able within your circumstances.

Good luck tomorrow! We wish you continued success as we journey together through this challenging time.

Recovery: From TRAUMA to TRUST

Dear colleagues,

Good morning!

As classes officially resume, Judy and I want to thank you for your profound efforts to translate your courses and maintain the high quality of your teaching. Our confidence in you as instructors, mentors, and guides continue as you work with your students to build your online community of learners.

This morning, we ask that you keep trust foremost in your minds:

- **TRUST** yourself and the plans you have made
- **TRUST** your students and their desires and willingness to learn
- **TRUST** your college support teams and their knowledge and expertise

We have all been tirelessly engaged in the work of survival this past week. Building stability and community has been our foundation in so many areas of our lives. Now, we can enrich those efforts through building capacity and learning flexibility, in our courses and in every aspect of our responses to the coronavirus trauma that affects us locally and globally.

Starting next week, we will be offering resources and recommendations regularly and less frequently. Our virtual offices are open Monday-Friday, and if there is an emergency, you are likely to find email response on the weekends (perhaps less rapidly).

Be safe. Be well. Be kind. You are already making this happen.

NEAR and FAR: Returning to the Remote LearningScape

March 19-May 4, 2020

NEAR and FAR 1: Returning to the Remote LearningScape

My dear colleagues,

Good morning. Welcome back to our remote learningscape. As Rabbi Akiva taught his followers, “It is not given to man to begin. That privilege is God’s alone. But it is given to man to begin again, and he does so every time he chooses to side with the living.” We are beginning again today; we are siding with the living we teach and with whom we share the bonds of family and community.

In this email, rather than share my thoughts and suggestions, I am sharing thoughts from two religious traditions as well as from two news sources. There is community in thinking together, which has drawn many of us to academic lives. With our students, we are co-creating these thinking communities, and it may be helpful to reflect on the places our teaching and learning communities have in the larger communities that help to define our lives.

This morning I woke to an email from Charter for Compassion, in which they shared the letter below from the Dalai Lama. Earlier this week, Allison Pease, our Associate Provost for Institutional Effectiveness, shared the attached tips from the Chronicle on supporting students, and that same day (Monday), I received the link below to a Washington Post article on the importance of human connection. Sometimes communities emerge that are serendipitous; it’s been that kind of week for me.

With thanks to all who contributed, I encourage you to read these three pieces as time permits and to join this afternoon’s open conversation at 3 pm (details below).

Sending each of you and all of you collectively the strength and purpose and joy that connects us with learning and seeing this through.

A Special Message from His Holiness the Dalai Lama

<https://www.dalailama.com/news/2020/a-special-message-from-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama>

How to Help Students Keep Learning through a Disruption

<https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/teaching/2020-03-19>

Human connection bolsters the immune system. That’s why it’s more important than ever to be kind.

One of the many cruelties of the COVID-19 outbreak: In a time when we most need the comfort of closeness, it forces us apart. But decades of research suggests that kinship, even from a distance, can be a powerful balm.

Read in The Washington Post: <https://apple.news/A9hs6NPZsRfqIzRL8HNomSA>

Be well. Be safe. Be connected.

NEAR and FAR 2: Returning to the Remote LearningScape

My dear colleagues,

You've done it! You've navigated the transition from immediate crisis to sustainable response. Congratulations, and thank you. Our students thank you. This was well done.

Today's highlights included:

- Students responded quickly to a newly set up Slack channel for discussion (within 15 minutes of being informed!)
- A faculty member volunteered to share her considerable experience of teaching with technology with peers (we're working out the details: stay tuned)
- Our latest online teaching and learning seminar cohort enjoyed a webinar on Blackboard Collaborate with one of our instructional designers

It was an active Friday!

We're on our second day of returning to teaching, if we had courses to convert to remote methods, and of rebalancing our courses, if we were teaching online. Could the weekend feel more welcome?

My routine reaction after making my way through the worst parts of a crisis is to feel dazed and out of sync with the habits that had been set aside and the work that had been deferred. It takes time to resume what feels normal and regular. This may or may not resonate with you, and yet I encourage you to be with what you are feeling and thinking this weekend, without judgement, and to follow your instincts for self-care (please continue social distancing and handwashing). It's time to take a breath and let yourself recover.

We have much to sustain and much to solve in the weeks and months ahead. With so much that is likely to challenge us for the longer term, we have time to take occasional breaks, to acknowledge our imperfections, and to appreciate ourselves anyway. It's a good time to be with those who know us best, in real or virtual proximity.

Unless unavoidably urgent communications are needed this weekend, I'll send the next email in this series on Monday. Take the time you need to self-regulate and rebalance; your students and your teaching will be grateful.

Please be safe and well.

NEAR and FAR 3: Returning to the Remote LearningScape

My dear colleagues,

We made it to Monday. And through Monday (almost). Do you feel yourself relaxing? Are you now wrestling with other parts of your lives (parenting, for example, or teaching at multiple institutions)? Finding new and healthy routines may be hard for the next months. We may need to value the ironies of snow falling two days into spring and laugh at the absurdities that can make our lives so seemingly impossible.

When we laugh at situations rather than people, and when we reframe our humor to take joy in the different ways other humans express and conduct themselves, it's all a bit easier. We've been intensely and seriously focused on keeping our courses and students on track, with us, and it's time to remember that it's not all going to work as intended, and we can laugh and then look for solutions. Try to be a bit lighter this week and hold your students lightly as we work our ways into this part of our teaching this term. During dark times, the warmth and expansiveness of light can help us remain whole.

A few recent highlights:

- One of our Sciences faculty recorded a demonstration using orange Jell-O and torn paper in the absence of lab materials
- A faculty member who lost access to her reserve texts at the library found a copy through another source and is working with the publisher to increase access
- Chairs and the TLC worked over the weekend to answer faculty questions about internet access, emailing students, and advising questions

These are small yet tangible examples of what is going well in the midst of so much that seems unworkable. You are making the change work, together. Thank you.

In the week ahead, please remember to care for yourselves as you care for others. We are just beginning what may be several weeks of changing our perspectives and living with uncertainty.

Laugh kindly and gently and fully when you can.

Warm regards.

NEAR and FAR: Attention, Memory, Presence

Good morning, my dear colleagues,

There are no words for what we and our worlds are experiencing. In the midst of the many ways you are affected by the pandemic, please cherish the moments in which you find beauty, in which you connect lovingly with others. Value the small and solid sensations of the present that anchor you. Please breathe and believe in the now that leads towards futures.

This morning, we are two days from an abbreviated spring recess. Classes run on a Wednesday schedule tomorrow, which further shortens the teaching week for many. In less than a month, we have been asked to move and restart our courses twice. This will be the third time. Finding and sustaining the attention of our students is likely to be challenging under these circumstances.

Let's think about attention before we step back for the break. Are you familiar with the cognitive scientist Daniel T. Willingham? His research has focused on how minds learn, and I often return to his principles when designing learning activities. Willingham (2009) writes that "People are naturally curious, but we are not naturally good thinkers; unless the cognitive conditions are right, we will avoid thinking."

Isn't this fascinating when we think of our students? We are attracted to new information but not to doing anything practical with it UNLESS "the cognitive conditions are right." For the cognitive conditions to be right, we need to believe that the problem to be solved is neither too easy nor too hard. Our work has to challenge us yet be within our current capacities to reach.

This describes the ideal learning situation, and we are in learning situations that are deeply affected by traumatic experiences. To the traumatized mind (see the table embedded here), curiosity itself is difficult to spark. To the traumatized mind, most problems may seem too hard to solve.

How do we respond, then, as educators in this uncertain time? Openly acknowledging the stresses that students may be experiencing helps them release these into safe spaces such as discussion boards or wikis. Compartmentalizing assignments into short steps and labeling these may make the work seem more attainable as well as safer to overloaded minds. Providing multiple opportunities for practice can reinforce senses of competency and thus rebuild confidence and again, senses of safety.

Minds at Work		
Traumatized Mind	Working Mind	Learning Mind
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • difficulty filtering stimuli (distraction) • inconsistent focus 	ATTENTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • actively filters stimuli • actively maintains focus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • difficulty retaining information • difficulty organizing information, even with practice 	MEMORY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • actively retains information • actively organizes information with practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • difficulty connecting ideas and skills • difficulty understanding contexts • difficulty creating coherent projects for external audiences 	PRODUCTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • actively connects ideas and skills • actively sees contexts • actively creates coherent projects for external audiences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • difficulty identifying appropriate external audiences • difficulty communicating projects appropriately or coherently to external audiences • difficulty distinguishing between performance/presentation and personal life 	PERFORMANCE/PRESENTATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • actively identifies appropriate external audiences • actively communicates projects appropriately or coherently to external audiences • actively distinguishes between performance/presentation and personal life
Gina Rae Foster, 2019		

Be safe. Be well. Enjoy the short break.

Recalibration: Make the Kind Choice

My dear colleagues,

This afternoon we received notice of yet another change to the academic calendar and to our efforts to teach and learn with our students. It is difficult to absorb the impact this may have on our students after we have just begun the transition to remote courses and after the past few weeks have seen such increases in the expansion of the coronavirus and the need to shelter ever more protectively. I write to assure you that we will find our ways through all of this, as we can, and that we will remember what I recommended on March 12 as our commitment to ourselves and our students: “First, take the kind step.”

Please be kind to yourselves, your loved ones, and your students as we navigate these surprises. There are good intentions motivating the decisions. As a start, you might decide which parts of your course your students can continue to engage on their own or with limited guidance from you over the coming break (those with sufficient access to assignments and resources such as the internet). And then you might reassure your students that you will continue to support and guide them through the next weeks despite the disruptions to class plans. Finally, I suggest you invite your students to share their feelings and ideas about going forward. Discussion boards, email threads, Slack channels: these are all places for conversation. Ultimately, you will choose what to do. Allowing your students to share their thoughts may help them find purpose and belief in seeing their courses to completion.

In the meantime, the college’s support services continue to function, and we are all responding to emails and other contacts as quickly as we can. Please reach out for what you need.

Recalibrating: Living with Both/And

Good morning, my resilient colleagues,

The worlds we know are rapidly changing. We are adapting and resisting. We are creating new futures. However you define your roles in the coronavirus crisis and the upheaval to our personal and professional lives, these roles matter. Students are responding to our outreach. Our families and friends are inventing new routines and connections. Our peers in and across departments are sharing resources and strategies. These are signs of resilience.

Let's build on this. Have you heard of the term "ambiguous loss"? Pauline Boss (1999) describes this concept in her book of the same name as the grief and ambivalence we feel when someone is either physically present and psychologically absent (such as a person with advanced Alzheimer's) or psychologically present and physically absent (such as someone incarcerated). Ambiguous loss is difficult to hold and to resolve.

The resilient response to ambiguous loss is developing a sense of "both/and." Both/and means that these seemingly irreconcilable positions can be acknowledged as real and deserving attention. Both/and allows us to live with John Keats' sense of "negative capability," knowing that not knowing the answers is okay, that we live our lives in and through developing acceptance and innovation.

This week our ambiguous losses have expanded. The coronavirus spreads, with associated threats to health and employment, home and hunger. Our efforts to continue educating, mentoring, and stabilizing have been interrupted and redirected. We have a need to embrace a mindset of "both/and."

During the recalibration pause that starts tomorrow, DOES and the TLC are offering several open conversation sessions (details below). Judy and I invite you to participate in those that meet your needs. Friday's open conversation, co-facilitated with Matt Perry and Gabrielle Salfati, makes time for us to share thoughts, feelings, suggestions, and questions about our post 3/11 experiences. Monday through Wednesday of next week, DOES has put together a recurring set of conversations on asynchronous learning with our instructional designers. Please continue to provide your students with affirmations, information, and assurances that we will resume and will co-design meaningful learning experiences. Please keep in touch with each other, and please reach out to all of us here at the college who support you.

Recalibrating: Honoring Silence

Good morning, my dear colleagues,

As last week's changes unfolded, our spring recess dates contracted and then expanded, making the past three days and the next three vacation time for faculty and students. In light of these schedule changes, please set this email aside until Thursday if you are protecting this time. Valuing our personal lives takes on extra importance during the pandemic.

This morning, I invite you to join me in honoring the losses, the suffering, and the courage of those we know and don't know who are at the eye of the coronavirus storm. Please use the space below as a visual silence while counting 30 seconds of audible silence.

Thank you. We are grieving. We need consolation. And we are needed.

When the Chancellor first announced the Recalibration pause, he seemed to indicate we would be improving our asynchronous teaching and learning skills as part of the break. In response, several offices designed events to assist with these revisions. Although we later learned that the days would be considered non-working days for faculty and students, we retained some of these events for those who might be interested. Participation is entirely optional, and if interest is expressed, these or similar activities may be offered again.

Last Friday's open conversation drew a dozen participants and was filled with questions and assertions. The TLC will offer weekly open conversations starting this Thursday afternoon at 3 pm, as opportunities to share and check in with each other. Please join us if you feel the need to connect and be with your peers.

As you have seen, DOES continues to design webinars and discussions rich in content and expertise. This week, starting today and continuing through Wednesday, there are multiple opportunities to join sessions on asynchronous learning with our excellent instructional designers.

Be well. Be safe. Honor the present.

Stability as Catalyst: How We Can Identify, Repair, & Reinforce Knowledge to Increase Capacity

My dear resilient colleagues,

Welcome back. For the third time in slightly over a month. As all 50 U.S. states and nearly all territories have reported cases of the coronavirus and in most of these locations have declared disaster as the shared experience, we know we are not alone in what we are confronting, and that our students, in their diversity across countries, economic statuses, and historical oppressions, are connected far more broadly to the profound suffering that enlaces the world. What we do now, then, deeply influences the futures that may emerge. Resilient, well-educated, capable human beings will repair and remake a world that may be more just and more sustainable than the one we now share.

With this in mind, I invite you to think with me about how to start well this week towards achieving your course goals while even more importantly achieving deep learning with your students. Even though we are two-thirds of the way through the term, the recursive beginnings have asked us to continue to establish common territory and assumptions to give our students chances to succeed in this term's courses. Today, let's consider the importance of checking for prior knowledge and misconceptions so that we can activate our students' learning stability and increase their learning capacities.

Ascertaining students' prior knowledge is essential to designing successful learning activities. When we check for knowledge that bears directly on our current objectives for problem-solving, communicating, and critical thinking, we can address gaps in knowledge fairly quickly (or identify needs for additional academic support). We also discover misconceptions (false news and inaccurate understanding of scientific principles, for example) that hamper the learning we present. Identifying and correcting misconceptions also helps us move forward in the spiral of learning.

How do we identify prior knowledge and misconceptions quickly and effectively? First, we prioritize what we think our student should know in order to complete the assigned work. Second, we give short quizzes or writing exercises, sample problems, or simply engage in brief group discussions to check shared understandings of definitions and processes. These two steps can be accomplished in less than half an hour and can be segmented into 5-10 minutes depending on activity. The follow up will be determined by your own sense of what needs addressing and how that will fit with your lesson plans.

To pair with this reflection on prior knowledge, I want to offer you a related practice I call "track records." It's my belief that we build track records in our own histories for how we manage to survive and rebuild after crisis and challenge. Remembering our survival skills (the ones that worked) activates our senses of stability and capacity. And these in turn reinforce our strength for facing what challenges us in the present. In the past 12 years, one of my standard interview

questions has been “What’s the hardest thing you have had to learn and how did you do it?” I’ve hired nearly 225 people during this time, with a corresponding tripling of the number of interviews. This question tells me not only how someone problem-solves and what professional skills they may need to improve; it tells me how someone faces adversity and what resiliency skills they have developed. The deeper benefit of this question is that answering catalyzes confidence, a true confidence in one’s own abilities that can immediately be called on.

As we begin again this week, please think about checking your students’ prior knowledge and misconceptions of what they have already learned in your courses. Please think about activating their confidence based on past achievements and persistence. Please do this for yourself.

To start this week and to activate our shared sense of accomplishment, I am pleased to share evidence of our past achievements in the attached TLC Annual Report. What we have done together in three years has surely laid the basis for what we are doing together now. Thank you.

Additionally, the TLC has created a comprehensive resource page to support your needs.

Please be good to yourselves and each other. Maintain social distance. Be close in heart and mind to those you love and can assist. Grieve, console, rejoice, and persist. We are here, today.

Wishing health and safety to all.

Between Fixed and Fluid: Working with Flexibility and Capacity in Response to Student Needs

My courageous and caring colleagues,

Good morning. If we are reading together, even asynchronously, then we have arrived at another Monday together, and in the midst of our grief and fear and uncertainty, this is a sign that we continue to survive and hope and connect. Thank you for all you are doing and being.

For those counting, it's been 40 days since the college first closed in response to the coronavirus. We've stopped and resumed teaching our courses three times or felt the disruptions if we were already teaching online. Despite our efforts to track attendance and engagement, we don't and can't have an accurate count of the students and colleagues we've lost and the loved ones they have lost and are losing. We know this number would be unbearable.

Holding this certain uncertainty within us, we look to our classes for consistency and familiarity in content and structure. We attempt to offer these to our students as we have in the past. We challenge ourselves to be flexible while maintaining standards. We believe in our students' capacities to learn even as absences and incomplete assignments limit what they are likely to achieve before final exams.

This morning, in response, I want to briefly address *flexibility* and *capacity* as principles of resilience and as principles of teaching. I believe that *flexibility* is a critical aspect of resilience as flexibility allows us to adjust and adapt to change while retaining a core sense of self. As one of the four [Resiliency Principles](#) (Stability, Capacity, Flexibility, Community) I use in trainings, for me flexibility is best understood as a continuum, with extremes at either end. Too little flexibility results in behavior that is rigid and like to break under pressure; too much flexibility leads to indecisiveness and a loss of stability. We have been advised to be flexible with our students during the pandemic: might we use this sense of continuum as a guide?

Similarly, *capacity* is often viewed as fixed, and we have heard this message applied to our own capacities just as we have applied it to others. However, if the extremes of capacity are experiencing capacity as fixed at one end of the continuum and unlimited at the other end, what lies in between that might be more resilient?

Recently, I have been asked questions about flexibility and grading, with concerns shared about capacities and timing. For example, how can we best communicate with students who are not turning in or completing assignments or are absent for several weeks? These situations can be difficult during a routine academic term. Now, there is increased urgency to help students complete their coursework and do well. There are increased desires to help students respond to their life crises.

Please keep in mind that too little flexibility in accommodating changes in students' schedules and commitments can set up situations that can damage the development of students' capacities and their learning. At the same time, too much flexibility is likely to result in confusion about expectations and missed opportunities to develop capacities and learning. In either case, the growth we want students to embrace towards their professional and personal goals will probably remain underdeveloped.

Too often, then, without realizing these middle grounds of flexibility and capacity, we make choices for our students that are inappropriate to who and where they are. We disempower their development with options that are too fixed or too fluid. We exclude students from generating options that do fit their needs and forget that we probably don't know the most important issues they are facing and the resources they with which they most need to connect.

In this spirit, then, I encourage you to consider the following questions:

What is in the best interest of my student(s) and their learning? Think about the immediate consequences as well as those for the next term (if graduating, for the job search, interview, and/or current position as part of an employed team).

What is in the best interests of my class as a whole? Think about where your attention is best focused and the needs of those students who are able to stay with the class and the assignments in balance with the needs of those students who cannot be present and focused consistently.

What is likely to happen in the summer and fall when my students move onto their next classes or employment (including job searches that the current economy may not support)? Think about the skills and knowledge related to your courses that your students will need to be competent in these next steps.

Above all, please keep in mind that we cannot solve problems that belong to others. Rather than propose solutions that are too fixed or fluid, we can listen, clarify, share our own lessons learned, and make appropriate referrals.

Remember: We have a Counseling Center ready to support students by phone. We have academic advisors poised to reach out to students who may need help to continue their academic work. We have a student emergency financial fund (much larger thanks to recent donations). We have a food pantry. There is much more. Please make use of these resources to refer students. And make use of your own expertise in teaching and learning to help students plan their next steps in your classes. Please empower your students by connecting them to the options and assistance they need to make informed decisions.

In closing, I would like to share a poem for National Poetry Month:
A blessing by our first indigenous Poet Laureate Joy Harjo

“For Calling the Spirit Back from Wandering the Earth in Its Human Feet”
<https://poets.org/poem/calling-spirit-back-wandering-earth-its-human-feet>

Warm thoughts and gratitude.



Gina Rae Foster, 2008

Approaching Our Goals: Connecting Feedback to Flexibility and Capacity

My dear colleagues,

My heart is with you. I cannot write of the grief and loss so present to us. I can share with you my empathy, sorrow, and prayers. Please be careful with yourselves and others. Please continue your efforts to stay safe and well.

Today, we begin our last three weeks of classes for what has been a fractured term of teaching and learning. We anticipate final projects and exams and the challenges of grading despite the disruption of so much of the continuity we trusted we would be able to provide our students. What can we do now, in these remaining days, towards increasing learning capacities? And by increasing capacities, I mean, in part, developing measurable evidence of learning, achievement of learning objectives, student progress towards graduation and careers, and instructor confidence in choices made and assessments given. With the communications necessary to achieve these, we may indeed feel this to be an intensified time for giving and receiving feedback.

This past week, I've been aware of the impact of feedback in nearly all areas of my working life. I've received and given feedback, observed feedback in action, and listened to experts talk about their feedback mistakes and lessons over decades of teaching. For me, feedback raises the often contentious relationship between *capacity* and *flexibility*.

Efforts towards the achievement of learning are one context of capacity and flexibility we share. Another is the pandemic and its devastation across our academic and personal communities. These two contexts are dissonant and in many ways working against each other, interrupting grief and survival, blocking attention and practice. We are not yet recovering; we are enduring, actively and passively. We are flexible; we are struggling to maintain and increase our capacities.

I write this to remind all of us that we have different experiences of capacities and flexibilities during times of endurance than we do during recovery or wellbeing. The feedback we provide our students merits this recognition. As you may remember, in a previous email, I referred to the effects of trauma on the learning mind. Attention and memory function differently when our minds are traumatized, and our minds learn more effectively with compartmentalized and concrete tasks rather than open questions and assignments. This advice holds true for feedback.

What I have learned and been reminded of this past week regarding feedback are that the most useful responses come from constructive criticism framed through these principles:

- The purpose of the feedback is explained and related to one or more learning objectives.
- The details of the feedback are connected to past, present, and future assignments or activities.

- The concerns of the feedback are potentially resolved through a specific, achievable action.
- The response called for by the criticism is focused on identifiable parts of the work and not on the person who did the work.
- The timing of the criticism takes into account how recently the student did the work being criticized and how soon conversation about the criticism is likely to take place with the instructor.

For most classes, we provide feedback throughout the course. In this term, we may have offered more feedback than usual or less, depending on the flexibility we and our students have chosen to continue during remote and online learning. As we work towards these final days of the term and grading, it makes sense that we might be thinking about feedback and how to use our critiques to guide our students towards their best outcomes and increased capacities. I encourage us to remain alert to the need for contained, connected, and catalyzing responses to our students. Let us agree to help our students and ourselves find the middle ground in all we are negotiating and to balance our desires for growth with our urgencies to adapt. We remain in crisis; let us continue to find stability and community together.

One more poem for National Poetry Month, this by the inimitable Japanese-American poet Garrett Hongo: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48947/the-legend-56d22a98239de>

Be safe. Be well. Be present.

Developing Shared Force and Efficacy through Capacity and Community

My dear, determined colleagues,

Good morning. Good thoughts to you all.

My friends and peers, many of you have shared that you feel exhausted and overwhelmed beyond your capacities. Many of you have shared stories of community through your students' successes and ordeals. And many of you are quietly, persistently making your lives function in the midst of griefs and challenges and uncertainty while giving more of yourselves to your students than you might have believed was possible. Thank you. Wherever you have found yourself in the pandemic, thank you. Whatever you believe you have or have not done well or enough, thank you. In your own ways and in your own times, you have been human and humane.

Today is Monday, May 4, and there is a fitting irony in the catchphrase, "May the 4th be with you." (a reference to the Star Wars franchise) With 10 days remaining of regularly scheduled classes, a week of final examinations, and just over three weeks until grades are due, a mystical, benevolent, and powerful force we could call on to transform our realities might be welcomed. As academics, we tend to call on, rather, reason and discourse to resolve our challenges.

With these in mind, honoring reason and discourse partnered with our humanity and humane inclinations, let's face these questions of capacity and community that call for our attention now:

- How will we guide our students through our final class meetings and deadlines?
- How will we manage the grading and feedback needed before classes end so that students can improve their performances in the final exercises that may determine their course grades?

Some of us may feel on track with these challenges. Others may be seeking reassurance and advice.

Perhaps now more than at any other time in our teaching careers, external circumstances influence our decisions (and those of our students). There are understandable variations in how we teach and how we are communicating with our students about how they can learn and complete their courses. Each of us thinks about developing capacity differently in our courses, and each of us approaches creating teaching and learning communities differently.

Given these differences that make your courses unique to you and your students, I encourage you to view the next 10 days as a time not only for arriving at the finish lines of your syllabi and schedules but also as a time for quick and repeated reflective questions such as these:

- What was happening in my course(s) by March 10?
- What happened in my courses during the 1st & 2nd mandated breaks?

- What has happened in my courses since we resumed more consistent yet remote methods of learning?

Please consider these questions as you attend to other tasks. Please share these questions with your students and encourage them to do the same. In response, you may find a short writing exercise helps you and your students to voice their anger, fear, sorrow, and senses of strength and achievement. Or you may prefer to leave the conversations outside of your class activities and suggest them as tools for creating perspective and strengthening memory. In either case, merely thinking through these questions will have a positive effect on increasing learning capacity and deepening engagement as a course community. Please remember that critical reflection reinforces practice and expands working memory (we remember what we think about). Similarly, critical reflection about shared experiences reinforces senses of connection to ideas and other persons as well as broadening the understanding of the experiences.

We develop our individual and shared senses of force through these cycles of reflection and repetition. In a course, small or large, as you may have experienced, the connections that we and our students make to the assigned material, the learning objectives, and the communal experience of following the same paths to problem-solving and presentation develop our efficacy, which might be another term for force. May this sense of force be with us through the next week and a half.

Thank you for staying with these emails during the past two months. After May 18, I'll take a break and then return a few times for those teaching summer sessions. Please continue to reach out with questions and suggestions in addition to comments.

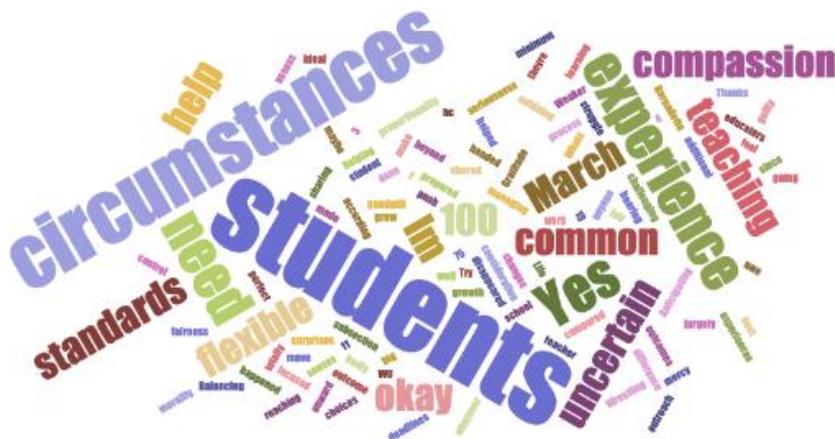
Empowering Empathy and Probable Futures: Stability, Capacity, and Grades

My dear, determined, compassionate colleagues,

If we had known resilience would mean both the courage to shelter-in-place to protect others and the heroism to be essential workers in the midst of unseen assaults, we might have begun this year, 2020, with far less belief in what we might do and how our students might demonstrate their strength and ingenuity when faced with scarcity and grief. I am grateful for what we did not know, and I am transformed by the ever-enlarging spectrum of what we know now about ourselves and our world.

This morning, in the penultimate email of this spring term, I am responding to requests centering on fairness and grading. We are a few days from the end of classes. Exams begin this coming weekend and end a week later, before Memorial Day. Although there will be no in-person Commencement this year, final grades matter, and they matter from the Master's level to the first year undergraduate. How then, in a term so disrupted by so many forms of crisis, in a term that counts towards so many futures, can we fairly assess our students' work and learning?

Last week, at the end of the TLC Open Conversation, the participants spent time in small groups discussing their experiences and values. When we reconvened, we shared parting thoughts on those conversations. The wordcloud below displays those comments and what was emphasized (larger words were used most frequently):



Out of this and other conversations, a short list of emphases towards fairness and grading have developed in my thinking, and I'd like to share those with you. When we consider how our students have performed, we can apply what I call **empowering empathy**, a combination of proactive support to guide and motivate and an openness to what others are thinking and feeling. With empowering empathy as a framework, we can look for **consistency** by reviewing how our

students were doing before the shift to remote teaching and learning and compare their performance with the present. It may be easier to evaluate grades for students whose work has stayed relatively consistent than for those whose work in your courses has changed noticeably. Following consistency (and occurrences of inconsistencies), we can form **reasonable expectations** based on what anyone might be expected to do or not do when inhabiting particular identities (read race, gender, sexuality, religion, immigrant status, socioeconomic status, prior trauma history, and more) and confronting particular traumas and crisis (death, illness, injury, oppression, unemployment, underemployment, over-employment, isolation, family responsibilities, and more). We can add in access to resources on many levels. Finally, we can match our decisions regarding grades to our students' **probable futures** and how these may be affected by this term's marks. We know the pass/fail option will be available for students wanting to change letter grades. And we know that grades awarded through goodwill rather than careful assessment may be ultimately damaging.

If this sounds time-consuming and wearying, I apologize. We each have our routines and rubrics for grading, and I want to assure you I respect your teaching and your judgment. If you are interested in applying some of what I've described above, here is a suggested rubric you may find helpful. My interest is in helping you come to decisions that you feel are just and empathetic: we are a college of justice, and the grades we award merit that principle from us. Fairness is not justice, just as compassion is not empathy. Trust your own combined senses of justice and empathy, and trust that we will work as a community to redress errors and injuries in the future as best we can.

Emergency Remote Teaching Suggested Grading Rubric			
Framework	Overall & Individual Context:	Overall & Individual Capacity:	Syllabus:
Foundation	<i>Accessible resources</i>	<i>Improved knowledge</i>	<i>Final projects/papers/exams</i>
Awareness	<i>Focused attention</i>	<i>Effective communication</i>	<i>Informal communications/activities</i>
Timing	<i>Sufficient, appropriately used time</i>	<i>Effective time management</i>	<i>Individual assignments</i>
Practice	<i>Prior skills relevant to course</i>	<i>Improved skills relevant to course</i>	<i>Learning objectives</i>
Mitigating Factors	<i>e.g., traumatic events; job loss/increased workload</i>	<i>e.g., inability to participate in group projects; problems with shared or insufficient technology</i>	<i>e.g., major changes to syllabus, activities, or final projects</i>

Thank you for all you are and do. Sending positive thoughts as you wrap up your classes.

Adapt, Restore, Remake: Reflections on Resiliency

My dear colleagues,

For nearly 10 weeks we have inhabited this remote space for nearly everything in our lives. This week, your commitments and efforts to sustain and guide our students' learning (and much more), will propel many towards achieving their degrees and many others towards their next steps in completing their goals at John Jay. Thank you.

As you may remember, in mid-March, when we left our assumptions of how and where we would be spending our days and shifted our teaching to accommodate the new places in which we found ourselves, we did not know what we would be asked to do. Making our classes dependent on technology, reaching out to students who did not respond, wrestling with adapting our values and pedagogies to tools with different options than we had used before: these were simple compared to the losses we and our students experienced, the illnesses we taught through, the devastating job and financial crises.

This morning I write to conclude our spring series on resiliency and remote teaching and learning. It has been a long and compressed journey, and I extend thanks to those many of you who wrote to share your questions and urgencies, your sorrows and successes. We've placed trust in each other, even when skeptical or overwhelmed. And we've seen each other through.

And yet, as Nobelist Elie Wiesel wrote. And yet. There are inevitable changes to come, inevitable reflections of what might have been. We ask ourselves, did we do well or enough? Perhaps it will be helpful to revisit and redefine what we mean when we think about resilience, crisis, and trauma.

Through my training and practice in family and community resiliency and continental philosophies, I see marked differences between how we view crisis and trauma. Crisis calls for solutions to a systemic conflict that can be made whole. To give examples, crisis pressures a system to resolve an existing problem that hasn't been effectively addressed (a budget crisis, for example, or a crisis in interpersonal communications).

Trauma, in stark contrast, is irresolvable. Trauma ruptures a system past the point of resolution so that the injury and signs of the injury remain (physical or emotional scars, amputation). Trauma does not emerge from a system but is rather an assault that cannot effectively be healed and forgotten (sexual assault, for example, or being hit by a car). Trauma changes who we are, permanently.

Many of us are familiar with this distinction: we resolve crises; we recover from traumas. In the latter case, healing trauma adapts the wounded system to restore and in many cases reinvent functionality but not to regenerate the system as it was. This is resiliency. Not erasing what happened or returning to who we were but remaking ourselves into who we are now and can be.

I emphasize these terms because as a community, we have suffered individual and shared traumas. We are not and will not be the same as we were. And we can be functional. We can move from surviving to thriving in new ways. And yet. We are not through either the crises or the traumas, and we do well to take a moment to rest (if we can) and reflect before finding ourselves present with what remains.

Let's ask ourselves: Over the past two months, how have we and our students remade and reinvented our work together? How have we adapted and become more resilient through our attention to stability, capacity, flexibility, and community?

This summer we teach and learn online rather than returning to our classrooms. It is likely this distance will continue into the fall. And as we continue to experience trauma and crisis, we are faced with the loss of many of our colleagues whose assignments are at risk through budget cuts that will scar our community for many years. There is much to anticipate and to grieve. Let us hold these ambiguous losses (simultaneous yet contrasting physical and emotional presence) with respect and care.

Again, thank you. You have demonstrated courage, strength, empathy, ingenuity, and resilience. You have become more and differently than you were. With our students and peers, we have imperfectly done good things, mirroring our counterparts around the world. Thank you for showing up in the midst of injustice to fight for both now and the world we want to know.

Over the summer, I'll reach out monthly with updates for those teaching and connecting. The TLC will offer workshops on basic teaching skills and partner with DOES on the Effective Practices in Online Teaching workshops. Faculty Development Day, as you have seen, is scheduled to take place on Thursday, August 27. If you need me, please feel free to email!

And please join me in thanking and celebrating the herculean efforts of our Department of Online Education and Support (DOES), which has trained, transferred, translated, and supported faculty and students through the remote transition and which continues to provide superb guidance in working with online education and educational technologies. Please send them congratulations and appreciation from your own experiences. Please extend these kind words to our essential personnel at the college.

Racial Justice

Summer 2020

Respect, Learning, Justice

George Floyd

Breonna Taylor

Kamal Flowers

Rayshard Brooks

Statements from members of the college, the union, and the university:

- [John Jay Student Council Statement Regarding Racial Injustice Amidst COVID-19 Global Pandemic Across the Nation and New York City](#)
- [Joint Statement from the Departments of Africana Studies and Latin American and Latinx Studies](#)
- [Gender Studies Statement of Solidarity with AFR, LLS, and BSU](#)
- [Statement from President Karol V. Mason during this time of unrest](#)
- [PSC Statement on the Murder of George Floyd](#)
- [CUNY Chancellor Félix V. Matos Rodríguez Statement on the death of George Floyd](#)

My dear colleagues,

Please take several minutes of silence in respect and mourning for the names listed above and the many, many lives they represent.

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We are a college of justice, both criminal and social, and given the history of this country and the histories that have formed our systems and policies of justice, are the question of and demand for racial justice. This email presents options for supporting conversations, connecting resources, and

deepening questions about what it means to teach students for whom racial justice is urgent and necessary **now**.

As a teaching and learning center, we believe learning requires self-education before we attempt to educate others; we believe we teach best when we experience ourselves as learners in the disciplines and methodologies we anticipate sharing. At a college named for justice, we at the TLC believe our role is to self-educate and to encourage others to join in self-education in order to learn how to teach effectively for racial justice and professional success. Social justice is therefore one of our strategic plan goals and the basis for many of our activities.

Please note that we do not claim that the TLC does or has done this work well. Over time, repetition, and revision, we improve our knowledge and practices to do the work better. We continue to ask you to do this work with us.

With this in mind, please consider these opportunities and resources for self-education and strengthening alliances towards antiracism and racial justice:

Academics for Black Survival and Wellness Call to Action (click the title for more information)

“Academics for Black Survival and Wellness is a weeklong personal and professional development training that will begin on Juneteenth, June 19, 2020. In recognition of the toll that anti-Black racism, white supremacy, and racial trauma has on Black people, we are inviting all academics to join with #Academics4BlackLives as we collectively strive to enhance the safety and wellness of Black students, staff, faculty and community members.”

Resources for Teaching and Learning Racial Justice

(also on the [TLC Teaching Resources](#) page)

“In this time of outrage and injustice and grief, we are responsible to our students for teaching racial justice both through content and practice. The following resources represent a few of those we feel are focused on truth, empowerment, and change in the ongoing efforts to create and achieve racial justice.”

- **Racial Equity Resource Guide:** “These resources focused on racial equity include journal entries, books, magazines, videos, and more.”
- **Teaching Tolerance/Teaching about Race, Racism, and Police Violence:** “These resources can spur much-needed discussion around implicit bias and systemic racism, but they can also empower your students to enact the changes that will create a more just society.”
- **Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching/Teaching Race: Pedagogy and Practice:** “this guide summarizes some of the common challenges instructors may encounter and offers five broad pedagogical principles for teaching racial justice, and three possible strategies for implementing each strategy in the classroom.”
- **‘Teaching for Black Lives’** — a handbook to fight America’s ferocious racism in (virtual or face-to-face) classrooms: “a collection of writings that helps educators

humanize blacks in curriculum, teaching and policy and connect lessons to young people's lives.”

TLC Open Conversations

We ask you to join us this summer in three open conversations about racial justice and our students. The topics will include self-education, identifying and addressing gaps in our teaching, and increasing our openness to learning from and with our students. As there are great vulnerability and risk implicated in these conversations, we will be requesting that those participating abide by group agreements for communication and that everyone register via Zoom in advance. We will ask that those who wish to speak raise their hands electronically. The group agreements and protocols will be available on our website later this week.

Racial Justice and Our Students: Where do I need to self-educate in order to educate towards justice?

Racial Justice and Our Students: How Do I Identify and Address Racial Justice Gaps in My Teaching?

Racial Justice and Our Students: How Do I Increase My Openness to Learning about Racial Justice from My Students?

In past years, we have sponsored teach-ins following national protests and events (e.g., post-election 2016, Charlottesville, free speech). We anticipate offering racial justice teach-ins this fall; this summer's conversations may help us frame these in ways that support and challenge our community where we are.

Thank you. Be safe and well.

Discomfort, Privilege, and Accountability

My dear colleagues,

Sending empathy, positive thoughts, and shared concerns for the many challenges and crises we are facing. July has been hot, humid, and beautiful as New York summers tend to be. And it has been crowded with endings, demands, and the ever-present need to distance and protect ourselves, strangers, and loved ones. Five months of living into the unknown. The smallest moments of joy seem so much more valuable.

Half a year ago, summer might have promised us relief from work, time to restore ourselves and to reconnect with those we love. 2020, in July, continues to confront us with shock, grief, loss, fear, and deprivation. Suffering has not touched us equally. Injustice has persisted in tearing a longer and more distant gap between privilege and its absence. And we persist in our commitments to create and share knowledge as means of addressing this imbalance, this inequitable, imperfect world.

This summer, with so much grief, violence, and violation infused through quarantine and social distance, many of us, from many different positionalities, are taking racial justice and equity as our objectives in our personal and professional lives. We are individually and collectively educating ourselves to hear and respond to our students' voices and needs. We are reflecting on our courses and teaching with questions of representative content, authors, and methods. We are finding those places of discomfort that can indicate a gap or friction in need of adjustment.

In these explorations, I want to recommend that we keep our awareness of our privileges directly related to our teaching. There is privilege in having had an education that prepared us for professional lives, in particular a college or university education, as many people living in this country do not have access to this kind of learning and the opportunities it creates. There is privilege in being employed, even underemployed, in a country with unemployment figures far higher than reported, with hunger and homelessness widespread. There is privilege in the authority we are given over students' grades and their presence in our classes. There is privilege in students' perception of the imbalance of power we own when they enter our classes and entrust us with their professional futures. If we are not uncomfortable, at minimum, with these privileges, we cannot address racial justice in our teaching and cannot hear and see our students in their authentic questions and learning. Our students see us as far less complex beings than we are; we are responsible for seeing ourselves through their eyes even as we wrestle with understanding and transforming ourselves in our own identifications.

It is imperative that we read, listen, and think with the resources and leadership on racial justice easily within our reach through college, university, and wider sources. At the same time, we can catalyze our understanding of what our teaching and courses lack or do ineffectively through careful self-questioning and reflection. With this in mind, I encourage the following areas as places to begin rethinking the presence of racial justice in our courses:

- Who are the authors and experts of the course content?
- What are included and excluded in course content?
- How are content and skills presented and with what expectations?
- What aren't students responding to as expected
- What aren't students regularly succeeding at
- Are there processes that feel as though a step or more is missing?
- Have there been comments from students that are surprising and seem at odds with what's been offered?

All of these are likely to have questions of racial justice as a context that for many of us was not primary when designing our courses. For those that have embraced a racial justice context, the reflection recommended here may lie in working even more closely with culturally responsive and accessible teaching and learning and in challenging students to transfer their experiences in these classes to others. We can encourage sharing of practices and perspectives not only across our collegiality but also across our student communities.

Please remember that now more than ever, we must hold ourselves accountable to our students as well as our disciplines. We must hold our courses accountable because our students hold their education accountable to their futures. In the midst of this accountability, we find greater equity, greater justice, and greater possibilities for living and sharing joyful, meaningful lives.

Thank you. My deepest sympathies to those who are bearing the losses of loved ones. Sending trust and positive thoughts to those who have lost work or are feeling overwhelmed with challenges. Please be as safe and well as you can.

Meaning, Purpose, Efficacy

My dear colleagues,

Our summer has been far more challenging than many of us were prepared to face. And it continues for another week, a week during which we are preparing once again for uncertainty and danger, a week during which we are beginning to reform our professional communities and refocus our beliefs towards strength, hope, and commitment. So many of you, of us, are teaching us forward in these times through your hard work and personal resilience. Thank you.

We are preparing to return and begin once again the cycles of teaching and learning, of research and service. We do these preparations off-balance, in the midst of loss and outrage and insufficiencies. Ironically, impossibly, we are attempting to be present and connected when we know we will largely be distant and differently timed. How, then, do we find meaning, purpose, and efficacy for these not-normal, not-normalizing, months ahead? How do we find these with, for, and from our students?

As a community, we will be carrying grief in its many expressions. Grief for the loss of loved ones. For the loss of jobs. Of homes. Of plans and networks. We will also be carrying determination because we will continue teaching, learning, researching, supporting, and guiding each other. We will be determined because we want our worlds to heal and change towards ones we believe are more just and authentic. We will continue because we believe joy, contentment, and happiness are possible.

What does this mean in practical terms? We can address attention, memory, production, and performance in our teaching. In practical terms, we can think about how to help our students (and ourselves) find and focus attention in order to form the memory we need to do the actual work that has been assigned. We can do this through compartmentalizing assignments and activities into tighter pieces that take less time individually to process and still accumulate towards the whole. To build memory, as our circumstances are often larger than we can take in and process easily or productively, we can return to practices that help form memory and help me engage in and complete tasks. I need transparently-defined context, then, to remind me of the meaning and purpose in my assignments. This context provides a container for repetition, the practice that helps me establish working memory. As I contain my work in smaller chunks that I am used to, I look for models of how my work ought to occur and become as products. Through comparing my practice to these models, within the context I find so necessary, I then can begin to perform and present my assigned tasks and can take in specific, focused feedback that connects to all four of these processes.

In your own reflections on the term ahead, I am confident that you will find your ways towards engaging your students and opening to their lessons about how and what they are learning through this indescribable year. May I encourage you to share your questions and reflections with those you feel will understand your intentions and offer feedback you have confidence in hearing? And...may I urge you to consider all that is disrupting and distracting your students' attention,

interrupting their faith in their dreams, and design your assignments and discussions towards healing and those gaps and reinforcing those visions? Thank you for all you do and are.

I look forward to our journeys this fall.

**Sustainable, Meaningful,
Honorable, Joyful**

Fall 2020

Sustainable, Meaningful, Honorable, Joyful

Dear Colleagues,

Welcome back, and thank you for being here where you are so deeply needed. As I write and reflect, I find myself wrestling with the following, singly and in combination. Are these also living with you?

- The West Coast fires are devastating in breadth and velocity. The evidence strongly links the totality of the fires to climate change and historically to the oppression of indigenous peoples in those regions.
- The imperative for racial justice confronts us with an ongoing and soul-wrenching spiral of continued evidence of officially sanctioned forces to kill and incarcerate Black people and a direct result of systemic, institutionalized racism.
- The CoVid-19 pandemic persists in spreading infection and death and thus persists in creating emergencies in employment, housing, hunger, and health safety for millions.
- Formal education at so many levels continues to struggle to maintain expectations and experiences for children and adults studying towards their next levels of growth and societal roles and responsibilities while placed in environments of risk, anxiety, solitude, and unstable technologies.
- Families and communities are facing increased desperation and problem-solving challenges and may not be capable of healthy, satisfying next steps now and may not be able to promise these in the near future.

What do we do? How do we address these in our work together as a college and in our lives outside with our families and communities? So many crisis points are converging right now, today, that we have reason to feel shocked to the center of who we are. And. We have reason and need to hold our shock as a catalyst for empathy and action towards a world we can work towards as a sustainable, meaningful, honorable, and even joyful future for all who choose to participate. Tomorrow we begin celebrating Hispanic/Latinx Heritage Month, a time that recognizes the identities and histories of nearly half of our students (according to the college website). How are we recognizing this month with our students? How are we inviting them to share their stories and dreams with us? Please consider making space in your online courses for these discussions. Visit HSI at John Jay to learn more about the history of Hispanic Serving Institutions and recent HSI faculty development activities at John Jay. This morning we begin our fourth week of classes, which usually indicates we are well embedded in the fall term and beginning to build on our initial interactions with students. We are fully online, with the exception of certain lab and studio classes. At this time, we may benefit from the following focused questions for reflection, which I've organized into four categories to frame the larger context for each set:

Stability:

- Do we know which students plan to continue in our classes?

- Do we have a sense of which of our students are likely to do well and which students are likely to need additional help?
- Do we have a sense of which technical issues seem to recur and what is working smoothly?

Capacity:

- Have we assessed our students' early assignments and engagement to form a sense of their prior knowledge and misconceptions as related to the course content?
- Have we outlined steps in the syllabus that demonstrate how students will gain the necessary knowledge and skills over the term to meet the learning objectives? (and have we reminded our students of these?)
- Are we modifying our expectations and instructions as seem appropriate to supporting our students' progress in their learning tasks?

Flexibility:

- Have our students demonstrated their awareness of flexibility in our policies for punctuality and participation?
- Do our assignments allow for any variations in interpretation? If not, do our students understand the need to follow instructions exactly as given?
- Are we creating spaces for student feedback that encourage us to explain concepts and assignments differently to respond to different ways of thinking?

Community:

- Do our students work together in pairs, groups, or teams? If so, what evidence do we see that these are improving student learning and pre-professional skills?
- Do our students know where to find academic support and life skills support (and are these resources on the syllabus or course site?)
- What connections are we making to our course activities and the professions our students plan to enter?

These are practical questions. For me, they address the opening concerns of this email in small, practical ways and can be linked to climate change, racial justice, the pandemic, education, and families and communities through connections to our course content and learning objectives. Sometimes we will need to make these connections explicit; at other times, our students will do this for us and likely with greater sophistication than we might anticipate. Thank you for being present and aware. Please continue to value this in our students, who show up to the screen and the lab and the studio because they are present and aware. Sincerely, Gina

Breonna Taylor: Student Support

Dear Colleagues,

This morning I am writing in response to the needs of our students after Wednesday's ruling on Breonna Taylor's case (I could use many words here that would be inflammatory and inadequate). Given the protests across the country and our student demographics, I encourage you to take time before your classes this coming week to frame spaces in which your students can be present with how they are feeling and what they are thinking, particularly in terms of how they are perceiving their futures. Many of our students can see themselves in Ms. Taylor, a young Black woman serving others in many concrete ways and pursuing professional goals similar to those of our students wanting to make a positive difference and transform the injustice of our world.

Here, I offer a few suggestions for how you might acknowledge and honor Ms. Taylor's life and discuss the legal responses to her death. A brief list of John Jay support resources is included.

Attached you will also find a list of classroom discussion resources for self-education and further reflection. Two of our TLC staff members, Euxhenia Hodo, a graduate in our Master's Program in International Human Rights this past May and Jalessa Manswell, a Master's student in her final semester and capstone course in the same program, have offered their suggestions to share with students.

What and how you teach is largely your choice, and I respect that privilege. At the same time, our students need us to be open and aware regarding their identities and needs. When history repeats itself and we are implicated, traumatized, and present, I believe we have responsibilities to share our awareness and learn together what we can do to create healing and motivate justice. This email comes from these beliefs. Please use the information as feels appropriate to your own values and vision.

Teaching Suggestions:

Showing respect and grieving together:

- Design a moment of silence. In synchronous classes, this can be at any time during a live session that works with the lesson plan. For asynchronous classes, a moment of silence recommended to

students to choose on their own time or the instructor can suggest specific date/time for those able to join, knowing they join their classmates in this moment.

- For those not wishing to participate or unable to, provide the option not to participate and encourage these students to focus on current assignments as they can.

Creating opportunities for discussion:

- Try offering a poll to ascertain the students' interest in conversation with same caveats as participation in moments of silence.
- Promise to post or share a summary of discussions if held.
- Ask students to submit anonymously their questions and concerns for discussion
- Create a discussion board or other online protected channel for discussions (with ground rules about sensitivity of content and communication).

Considering needs for accommodation:

- Please refer to course policies and explain what specific flexibility for deadlines and participation is available for students who are unable to concentrate or be present with their work.
- Please be specific about how and where to submit requests for accommodation.

John Jay Student Support and Activism Resources:

- John Jay Counseling Services Center (please read the site carefully before making referrals) . For students needing emotional support as well as study and life skills assistance.
- John Jay Africana Studies Links: an in-depth list of news and organizations related to “The broader mission of the Africana Studies is to engage in research, teaching and public policy that serve the needs of Africa and the African Diaspora.”
- Black Student Union (BSU)~The purpose of Black Student Union is to foster an environment whereby students can be introduced to black history, culture, and politics in order to provide a more complete sense of self-consciousness, education, black unity, and respect through participating in social and political functions on and off campus that provide enrichment and enlightenment. (no contact information available; students can check social media and college news)
- The Future of Public Safety: livestream conversations with experts in law and police work about the changes needed to transform law enforcement. This series is recorded and runs through October 1.

Please be safe and well. Please take a moment to review the attached lists of resources. Towards a more just and humane world.

Balancing Compassion and Expectations with Feedback

Dear Colleagues,

Many of us are rejoicing after the weekend's news and evidence of first steps by the incoming administration. We are feeling that a just, more humane, sustainable world might be one we can co-create. And we must acknowledge those in our community who feel differently and have acted out of different beliefs. There are conversations ahead that will be difficult and necessary. Let us commit to being present when and as we can and to making the kind choice the center of our advocacy towards justice.

Echoing these perspectives, I want to focus this monthly email towards balancing compassion and expectations with feedback. This past week, while we waited for the election results and while we witnessed the pandemic surge, several students met with me to discuss their concerns and their visions for teaching and learning here at John Jay. A combination of graduate and undergraduate students, with various leadership positions and work responsibilities, this group has joined the TLC Advisory Board in response to their own positive and negative learning experiences at the college and their desires to advocate for their peers.

Much of our conversation focused on shared concerns that included asking their instructors to show greater compassion for individual student circumstances and also to provide more feedback indicating their progress towards learning objectives and grades. We were not, in our brief time together, able to define further what was meant by compassion and feedback; what I did note was that many of my conversations with faculty this past year (and before) have elicited confessions of disquiet and anxiety (Am I being unkind or overly compassionate? Have I helped enough? How can I maintain standards while making accommodations?) along similar lines.

Perhaps, as we approach the end of the term, it is a fertile time to address these questions. Many students are asking for compassion and feedback, and many of us are wrestling with heavy workloads and personal responsibilities that demand more attention than we believe we can spare. How can we be asked to make changes?

Two recent events sponsored by the TLC have proposed the often dismissed "less is more," and I encourage you to consider just this in your responses to students. Not less across the board but rather less in terms of frequency and intensity. The real change will come in being attentively present for students as they themselves identify their needs and next steps, with structured, specific advice offered on our side less frequently and more purposively.

When our students approach us for help, we can remind ourselves that the college has a community of offices and support personnel well-trained to respond to housing, hunger, employment, and health issues. We can ask our students if they have the resources they need to resolve their current challenges. And we can make appropriate referrals. This is compassionate and empowers our students. These responses also free us from making potentially damaging changes to course schedules and assignment expectations.

When our students complete assignments, from small free-writing exercises and pop quizzes to presentations and research papers, they want to know the value of their work and how they measure up to their instructors' expectations as well as how they are progressing towards their final grades. For most of us, the amount of work we assign far exceeds the time we have to provide comments. Rather than burn ourselves out or mark only the largest of assignments and tests, we can be selective and offer students feedback on what we most want them to develop, with standardized comments we can copy and paste into ongoing work. We can use audio commentary when appropriate for asynchronous work. And we can provide students with rubrics that help them decode the comments and marks we offer.

Included in this email are resources from our recent Caring vs, Care-taking workshop facilitated by Percy Ellis Sutton SEEK Academic Counselor & Adjunct Faculty member Delmar Dualeh and myself. In this workshop, we shared practices and questions for practicing respectful and empowered compassion with students. Also included below, you will find the description and recording for Don't Panic at the Deluge: Responding to Student Writing Using Digital Tools, Tara Pauliny's and Tim McCormack's excellent presentation on practical, effective approaches to grading student writing that can be translated to other fields.

Thank you for continuing to teach, mentor, support, and be the change. I am grateful for our communities of practice and our community that believes in both kindness and justice.

Essential, Balanced, Here

Dear Colleagues,

Yesterday the first dose of anti-COVID-19 vaccine was administered to a CUNY alumna, one of our many former and current students who have been essential workers during the pandemic. There is something profoundly appropriate in this moment of recognition and protection of those who are laboring on behalf of our city, state, and world. There is something profoundly awkward and necessary in our education and mentoring of those who are working towards our safety and survival. The irony of evaluating student work and submitting grades unbalances us, does it not? In a year that has been frequently pulled off center, I want to thank you for finding your ground again and again and for holding that ground for your students as well.

We continue to shift emphasis in our professional lives between the familiarity of academic calendars and standards and the uncertainty of virtual activities and the uneven presence of nearly all of us in classes and meetings and communications. Despite the vaccine beginning distribution, these shifts will continue for much of the next year as we wait for our turn, as our students wait in environments less likely to receive doses and attention. Will you join me in taking a deep breath, taking time for yourselves, and preparing to be present?

The coming weeks offer many of us days or weeks away from our regular assignments. Clearly, we have much to face in our personal lives, and the grief many are experiencing may be intensified. And yet. Having to balance fewer obligations may be an opportunity to focus on primary needs such as shelter, sleep, food, and community. And if any of these needs are at risk, and we know they are for many, those of us better resourced can balance by giving more of our attention to sharing and assisting. There is a restorative energy in practical caring, for ourselves and for others.

As the snow embraces winter, and as we embrace hope that the pandemic will end decisively in favor of the survivors and the future, may we all embrace what matters most to us in the time we have now, and may we do this with the certain knowledge that we will embrace those whom we love with all our love before the next year ends.

Sending warmth, safety, and gratitude. You are all essential. We need your balance. We need you here.

Transparency, Containment, Meeting

Spring 2021

Transparency, Containment, Meeting

Dear Colleagues,

Warm greetings and a belated Happy New Year. May we all find health, healing, wholeness, strength, and belief in a more just future this coming year.

In just over ten months, we have known a different world. We have known a world in which we have lost family, friends, and other loved ones. We have experienced assaults on health and on income and employment, housing and food, our own and others. We have known isolation and over-reliance on devices and deliveries to counter these crises. We have masked, gloved, washed and sanitized our hands. All this, and our world remains perilous.

And yet. We have taught and mentored students who share these experiences, often at greater intensity than ourselves. We have empathized while encouraging. We have continued to educate. Now we prepare to return, perhaps better prepared for remote teaching and yet most likely feeling the fatigue and discouragement that have been building despite our best efforts. I am with you. We can hold to our present while investing in transparency, containment, and meeting as strategies to accomplish our goals and as strategies for self-care.

It helps, doesn't it, in our own lives, when someone takes extra care in explaining expectations and providing context? When navigating unfamiliar healthcare systems, tax software, internet providers, and more, it's necessary to understand the structure, the terminology, and the typical processes that can make these interactions successful. Our students approach our courses with similar needs for transparency.

How does transparency work in our courses? From the simple inclusion of correct contact information (e.g., name, email address, times when messages will be checked and answered) to a visual explanation of the course's assignments and grading (think flowcharts, pyramids, pie charts) to a discussion board on policies and group agreements that invites students to ask questions and encourages instructors opportunities to revise as seems appropriate: transparency provides context, structure, language, and examples to help us work together with less frustration and more focus.

In terms of focus, let's remember that our students are also tired and likely to need more internal strength to process new information. In addition to transparency, we can contain. We can break our assignments and virtual sessions into smaller segments, using these to introduce content and to practice memory and skill objectives. Pacing our courses in these ways may lead to more frequent, shorter assignments and fewer large final projects and exams than we are used to. For those who weight their courses heavily towards the final proofs of exams and papers, please give yourself permission this term to contain your assignments in the service of the learning that can happen, in the service of meeting our students where and as they are.

Finally, what should and can be first is meeting our students in their present circumstances, hopes, and capacities. Whether synchronously or asynchronously, we can design moments for our students to let us know what they know so that we can help them develop their capacities into greater potentials, so that we can understand what limits and supports their full participation in learning, and so that we can applaud their dreams and perhaps amplify their future goals. We can meet our students in informal live and offline chats, in assigned free writing or creative activities, in team project-based learning, and much more. I encourage you to look at your syllabus for opportunities to make small (or large) adjustments that will invite you and your students to be better acquainted so that you can move through the term with greater confidence and anticipation.

Please check these sites for specific tips and resources that align with and support your teaching this spring:

- [John Jay Teaching and Learning Center](#)
- [John Jay Teaching and Learning Center Virtual Teaching Resources](#)
- [John Jay Teaching and Learning Center Teaching Resources](#)

Thank you for continuing to read, reflect, and discuss these emails. Let's keep connecting..

Attention and Balance: Sensibly Teaching and Engaging Our Students

Dear Colleagues,

We're starting the third week of the spring semester, with the pandemic, politics, and an overwhelming combination of global and local, professional and personal demands in our lives. Covid-19 continues to affect and infect us, taking our loved ones, forcing isolation and distance. What we share often seems unbearable and unspeakable. Except, at times, for hope. Except, with great frequency, for the desire to do and be more.

By this point, six weeks into the year and nearly a fifth of our classes into the term, we know which students are likely to be present in our courses. From their presence and performance, we know which are likely to complete the work and which are likely to excel or struggle. And yet. Our predictions are imperfect, all the more during the past year when so much has tended to change so abruptly.

What is it, I wonder, that our students predict from us after their initial assignments and discussions? Obviously they expect that we will be present as well and more reliably than they might. Have they also decided which of us will excel or struggle in guiding them through the rest of the term? Will their judgments be more accurate than ours?

Recently, I have been reflecting on conversations about student presence and attention (not the same yet related) and questioning how students might be perceiving our attention towards them and their work. Teaching remotely raises concerns about engaging student attention and verifying that students are indeed attentive. Learning remotely can raise similar concerns about instructor engagement and authenticity.

It's difficult, yes? to make and sustain eye contact screen to screen, with internet instability as one complicating factor. Certainly, it's challenging to convey focused and specific attention in discussion board and assignment feedback when students may submit relatively similar responses that call for similar comments. Quite often, noting student behaviors that might indicate needs for outside of class support takes tremendous energy on our part (and we may not be interpreting students' signals effectively). Being attentive in ways that our students perceive as beneficial while protecting our own time and stamina is one of the most daunting challenges of teaching.

Sending good thoughts, positive energy, and faith in all you do.

Remote, Responsive, Present, Here

Dear Colleagues,

A year ago and a handful of days, most of us were suddenly cut off from the physical spaces of John Jay. We faced a mere week to adapt to our circumstances, rewrite our courses, and communicate the changes and expectations to our students. Within hours of the news, I sent you encouragement and a plan for those seven days. What I had intended as solely a week of support at a moment of crisis has become a much longer commitment, and I thank you for continuing to read, to reflect, and to respond. As I write, the pandemic persists. As I write, we are also persistent towards a future that can be safer and more just.

In this email, I write to recap the year and suggest a possible rethinking of where and how we educate. While we are vaccinating and balancing stasis with change, I feel a profound responsibility to acknowledge the unbelievable losses and challenges that so many of us have experienced. There is no comfort; there are no words sufficient to heal this grief and these injustices. And yet, there is power in compassion and in shared mourning and shared understanding of deep wounds.

I also feel responsible to acknowledge the disparity of circumstances and experiences we have endured. The pandemic has assaulted us unevenly in terms of persons and employment and homes. We cannot in this instance that has seemed interminable put ourselves in other's shoes with any sense of surety.

This has been most evident in the recurrence of violence motivated and supported by systemic racism individually expressed, collectively supported. As we choose whether and how we will become students of oppression and its unmaking, we have many, many deaths to mourn and lives to honor alongside efforts to remake justice that embraces us all.

Responses to the pandemic and teaching have been differentiated as we live and continue to live in a multiplicity of identities and circumstances. We continue to confirm that nothing works for everyone and every class, and we do find that some principles and some strategies tend to be more successful than others across diverse needs. These include, briefly, transparent structure, evidence of attention on both sides, and regular check-ins on attention and what is being produced, with the addition of selective feedback and credit for work accomplished throughout the course rather than basing final grades on final exams or capstone projects. Again briefly, trying to recreate courses as they have been taught in-person and weighting grades heavily towards the final few weeks of the term tends to penalize students and yield less learning and less engagement. These strategies have worked well (not perfectly but well) before and during the pandemic.

Looking forward, with the increased safety that vaccinations may bring, we continue to see uncertainty about where we will be and how close we may be to others, especially our students. Living for too much time in uncertainty and forced separation or unrelieved cohabitation is

unhealthy, as many of you know whose research engages with these all too human and all too unjust experiences.

Looking forward, then, we have an opportunity to radically transform higher education into a necessary process for our students, ourselves, and all of our community that better aligns with who we are and who we want to become. During this time when opportunities for change are extensive, I want to suggest that we radicalize our thinking and our practice going forward, that we adopt the local as global in terms of our relationship to John Jay. While our physical buildings in Manhattan are the campus we envision as the college, quite practically and factually, it's evident that we each have a version of John Jay in our homes, in our spaces for work and study.

However difficult it has been to balance our working and personal lives, we have managed to remain in John Jay while being physically remote. Isn't it time we acknowledge that we each have a John Jay campus active in our lives and that we can envision and create the college where we work and connect in ways that may be healthy and delimited and effective? If we can encourage our students to embrace this perspective as well, John Jay will be less dependent on where we are or might be than on who and how we are and choose to connect.

I firmly agree that physical presence is different than online presence and that the differences strongly influence the teaching and learning relationship. However, research demonstrates that online education has been shown to be effective on its own terms and with its own pedagogies and resources, and the complexities and demands of our students' lives often means they need a combination of in-person and online as well as hybrid courses in order to attain their degrees and move into their chosen professions. Even when it is safe to sit grouped in classrooms, our students will need options, and as they must be flexible with their balance of employment, home, and studies, we will inevitably need to be as well. The pandemic demonstrates that we can do this, perhaps not easily or well at all times.

For the coming year, then, while we are working and living where and as we are, I will be reframing home as a place simultaneously real with the college and learning to shutter virtual windows and turn off multi-present devices so that my personal and professional lives can each be respected and maintained. Above all, I will respect and honor the learning we do together as present and as meaningful as that we did in person. We are no longer remote. We are residents of our own inextricable, interlaced, and independent environments. I invite you to join me as we remain and remake.

Please be and stay safe and well. Take kind care of yourselves.

Kind and warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Oba Baraka". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a vertical line extending downwards from the end of the name.

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