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How to Recover the Joy of Teaching After an Online Pivot

By *Flower Darby* | MARCH 24, 2020



Jarod Opperman for The Chronicle

I clearly remember the immediate frenzy of activity that followed my father-in-law's death from cancer at age 49. We were devastated by the loss, but we were so busy that we didn't feel the deep and lasting pain until later, when the funeral was over and the out-of-town guests had gone. I expect something similar to happen with the Great Pivot Online Crisis of 2020.

In the first few weeks of the pandemic, a lot of faculty members were rushing out of their comfort zone, moving their face-to-face courses online, and figuring out how to teach from home with kids and pets. As head of a teaching center on my campus, I am seeing many of my earnest colleagues overcome their nerves and experiment with unfamiliar modes of instruction. They are excitedly posting their first attempts at recording mini-video lectures and drafting syllabus statements of flexibility and support for students.

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fact that your students are people and to let your teaching become a to-do list of administrative tasks and a mountain of grading. I've worked hard to overcome that sense of drudgery — to rediscover the joy of teaching when, like a candle deprived of oxygen, it flickers and dies out in a sterile online classroom. And you can, too. There are

But how long will that fizz last? After all, many faculty members are sacrificing much of what they love about their chosen vocation. At some point, they will need time to mourn the loss of spring 2020.

It's only natural that folks will start to feel discouraged, disillusioned, and even grief-stricken once the initial frenzy of pivoting online has died down and the reality of remote instruction — day in and day out, for the rest of the semester — sinks in, without even the prospect of commencement to look forward to.

I've taught hundreds of online classes over the past 12 years, so I'm well aware that it can feel like a grind, if you let it. Teaching online, as I've noted before, can feel detached, remote, and impersonal. It's easy to lose sight of the

ways to recover your fizz, as you face the weeks ahead.

First, don't ignore your feelings. I encourage you to pay attention to them more than usual during the rest of this semester from hell. As Kevin Gannon recently noted, "This is not the semester I ordered." Slow down from time to time and take note of what feels good and bad about your online pivot.

Facing up to your frustrations, rather than stuffing them down into a bottle and jamming the lid on top, helps you process the experience in a healthy way, take charge, and feel less like a victim.

Be transparent and vulnerable with your students, too. Talking with them about the challenges you're all facing will help them process this experience. Admit openly that the situation kind of sucks (or really sucks). It helps.

Restart. Pause. Continue. Those of us experienced in the online realm have been advising faculty members all over the country to start simple — to get a few basic readings and activities into their campus learning-management system (LMS) and to go low-tech and asynchronous, given that students may have varying levels of tech and internet access wherever they are at, away from the campus.

After the initial pivoting frenzy dies down, pause and reflect on your newly online courses. What's going well? What's not? Should you stop doing something that's not working, or refine it and try again?

Be intentional in taking stock of how you and your students are experiencing the course, and be ready to keep tinkering. Indeed, send out a quick anonymous survey asking students what you should stop, start, and continue doing in the course. As a colleague said to me the other day, students look an awful lot like people, and people like to have

some say in their experience. So ask them. You won't be able to make all the changes they want, but you can share what you decided to keep, drop, or adjust, and why. They'll appreciate you closing the feedback loop.

I think one of the main takeaways from this big experiment will be to inject a huge dose of flexibility into higher education. You've proven — perhaps unwillingly — that your battleship can change course, and quickly. This crisis has had plenty of downsides, but realizing that you can be flexible in the classroom is not one of them.

Layer on more engaging tech. Having started simple, you can add additional, media-rich content when you feel your energy and interest in online teaching start to lag.

For example, if you initially resisted adding videos to your course, try using your smartphone to record casual, 90-second videos of yourself giving a class update. Record the videos from your kitchen, or in a park while walking the dog. That doesn't require a lot of time or planning. Have a couple free minutes? Need to talk to your students about something? Do it, using your phone, and post it. It's good to be authentic — to let them see where you are and what your day is like.

Or, invite students to post brief video responses (using their phones) on your online discussion board. That does a lot to liven the atmosphere, which will likely increase your enjoyment of teaching in this mode.

Also, a few weeks into this online experiment, take a little time to investigate some of the more ambitious tech tools provided by your institution, such as VoiceThread or Flipgrid. Those tools may feel less daunting after a bit of practice with online courses. Most campus teaching centers will continue to offer workshops, tutorials, and other guidance to help you engage with your students this spring.

But don't overdo it. We faculty members are prone to being distracted by bells and whistles. As every instructional designer will tell you, if there's not a pedagogical purpose to a technology tool, don't use it. Be careful, too, about asking students to use third-party software that requires a new log-in or might not be fully accessible. Still, if your college offers a tool — and it meaningfully supports your students' learning — play around with it to see if it might enhance your teaching and their learning.

Keep interacting more with students, not less. As we all know, the worst online courses have a well-deserved reputation as boring and unengaging. If you're being thrown into the deep end of remote teaching with very little time to prepare, you are discovering that for yourself.

In the first week or two of your online pivot, you probably communicated a lot with your students, bringing everyone up to speed on how this new incarnation of the course was going to work. Your instinct may be to pull back on that communication as all of you

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start to get (at least a little) comfortable with this online pivot. But now is not the time to be restrained with class interactions, and doing so can lead directly to dull online courses.

If you think about it, you'll realize that you provide a lot of guidance, nudging, and reminding naturally when you teach in person: You remind students about the test next week, comment on how today's activity builds on what they did last week, and check in and ask how group work is going. You give any number of helpful suggestions, and you adjust your approach, as needed, based on the verbal and nonverbal feedback you get in class.

That can happen in a virtual classroom but not anywhere near as naturally. Teaching well online requires intention, effort, and a commitment to working with students in different ways than you do in person.

One of the best tech tools for such class interactions is one you already know how to use: your smartphone. You communicate in meaningful ways with people at a distance all the time, day and night, with your phone. Let me be clear: I am not suggesting that you conduct class on your phone. I am suggesting that you consider all the ways that students can "do classwork" on their phones, and how you might reimagine what classwork looks like. Might students submit Tweet-like reflections on course content? Micro-blurbs that show their learning? Might you use an anonymous texting app like Remind to communicate more seamlessly with your class? (Don't worry, you can set office hours to prevent notifications in the middle of the night.) Might they snap a pic of their location or learning activity (think kitchen-lab science) and upload it to the LMS?

With some creative thinking, the possibilities for smartphone-related communication are endless — and worth it. The more you interact with your students online, the more they'll interact with your course content, each other, and you. You'll find your remote-teaching experience to be more satisfying as a result.

Be kind to yourself (and everyone else). This is a stressful professional situation. You're going to need to change your initial online plans, I can almost guarantee it. Things will go wrong, and you will have to be ready to flex, yet again.

Give yourself breaks. Protect your personal time to do things that bring you joy, that help you re-energize. Practice yoga. Enjoy a good cup of coffee, a healthy snack, a glass of wine. Engage in mindful meditation. Nurture your spirituality. Binge-watch bad television.

It's a weird world we're living in. Businesses are closing. People are losing much-needed income. Fears abound. Toilet paper is scarce. We can be kind to one another amid all the crazy. It can only help.

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