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Teaching, Truth, and Trust

—Benjamin D. Jee

Dear readers of *Currents in Teaching and Learning*,

Here in central Massachusetts, the days are getting shorter and the air is getting crisper, a familiar backdrop for a return to regular academic activities. Of course, the past few years have hardly been regular. We continue to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic in our personal and professional lives. As of this writing, war continues to rage in the East, exacting an unimaginable toll on the people of Ukraine and threatening democracy itself. Closer to home, the supreme court has overturned *Roe vs. Wade*, dismantling a women's right to choose. All of these highly consequential events have arrived at a time of heightened social tension and political division in our country. We live in interesting times.

As college and university educators, our job is to prepare students for the challenges of a complex and ever-changing world. We expect our students to master course material, but we also want to promote broader skills and abilities, such as thinking through problems, creating novel solutions, and communicating clearly and effectively. In a landscape of misinformation and social media filter bubbles, higher education provides a rare model for reasoned argument and civil discourse. An offhand remark or an impulsive action can be instantly gratifying, but are a pale substitute for deep understanding and earned wisdom.

Yet, the standards of evidence, reason, and civility are losing ground. It's been said that a lie travels halfway around the world before the truth can put on its boots; and nowadays the truth often takes a back seat to social media "likes" and shares. In public life, expertise and sound evidence are cynically dismissed in favor of popular opinions and personal preferences. Trust in U.S. institutions, including the education system, has plummeted over the past several decades (Gallup, 2022). These are troubling trends for those who uphold the ideals of higher education

In this day and age, building trust in the classroom is a tricky proposition. It takes trust to build trust, a seeming Catch-22 for instructors. Students may resist or dismiss us when our efforts cause them doubt or discomfort. But it is in the nature of higher education to push students beyond their current knowledge, expose them to new perspectives, and provide them with constructive criticism to digest.

So, how do teachers build trust in an atmosphere of cynicism, confusion, and distrust? How do we encourage students to choose the path of intellectual growth over infinite distraction and immediate gratification? I wish I had a surefire solution to these problems. When I reflect on my experiences in the classroom and my relationships with students, the key ingredient that comes to my mind is this: joy. In the best of times, teaching is a joyful experience for both student and teacher. When I introduce an illuminating idea or conduct a captivating demonstration, I participate in my students' excitement and enjoyment. I am invigorated by their pure curiosity, and excited to explore new questions alongside them. I like to hear what they're thinking, and what they care about. In my mind, these joys of teaching are instrumental to building trust and respect. It's a core quality that unites a classroom, a department, a university.

At this time of year, at the beginning of a new academic calendar, I want to nourish the sense of joy that sustains me in this profession. I want to start off on the right foot with a new crop of students. If you're reading this issue, you may be searching for inspiration to start your year, a new activity to try out in class, or perhaps some new methods to add to your bag of teaching tricks. As the editor of *Currents*, I hope that you find something in the present issue that feeds your passion for teaching and learning.

In the article, "Integrating Values-Enacted Learning into Project-Based Learning Courses," Michael W. Kaufmann explores ways to help students connect the

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skills they acquire in a course with values that motivate their behavior. Kaufman discusses a senior English seminar in which students interacted with members of a theater company—observing rehearsals, interviewing artists, etc.—in order to document the processes involved in producing plays, such as script revision, and costume design. Students were prompted to reflect on values related to successful collaboration, including compromise and communication, as they pursued their own research projects. As Kaufmann notes, it takes trust for students to openly discuss values, but such discussions motivate responsibility, productivity, and creativity.

In “Teaching with the Getty Museum Challenge in Humanities Classrooms,” Andrea Korda, Mary Elizabeth Leighton, and Vanessa Warne discuss how they adapted the Getty Museum’s 2020 Challenge as a remote learning opportunity. Students in English and Art History classes were tasked with recreating a 19th-century painting or photograph using readily available materials, and to submit a digital photograph of their product along with a learning reflection. Korda and colleagues convey that the assignment was not only fun, but helped to promote deep thinking about the original piece; for example, students detected significant details that may otherwise have gone unnoticed. The care and consideration that students put into the assignment is readily apparent in the sample photos included in the article.

The power and potential of blended modes of instruction is discussed more broadly in Rebecca Smith and Annie Cole’s article, “Understanding Blended Learning: Envisioning Culturally Inclusive Online Spaces.” The paper reviews the benefits and challenges of blended learning, and discusses how blended teaching and learning can be made more equitable and culturally responsive. Smith and Cole raise a number of important considerations for effective and inclusive blended modes of instruction.

In domains such as Chemistry, instructors had to come up with creative solutions when labs were shut down due to the pandemic. In the article, “Hybrid Teaching in the Organic Chemistry Laboratory as a Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Han P. Q. Nguyen, Nhu Le, Emily Doran, Emma Polak, Jeremy Andreatta, Margaret Kerr, and Wei-Chu Xu describe how faculty in a Chemistry department collaborated on

new methods and materials to provide effective hybrid lab experiences for their students. The authors describe their careful process of creating videos—each covering relevant theory, techniques, and principles—to facilitate students’ work on lab assignments. While their materials were borne out of a need for an alternative to standard lab activities, the authors describe plans to incorporate their videos (which are openly accessible on YouTube) in future courses.

Rounding out the present issue is, “Cross-Cultural Contexts of Teaching and Learning: Experiences of International Faculty at a Southeastern University in the United States,” by Nyasha M. GuramatunhuCooper, Darlene Xiomara Rodriguez, Uttam Kokil, and Sabine H. Smith. The authors interviewed international faculty from a variety of cultural backgrounds, including African, Asian, and European, with the aim of identifying trends in their teaching experiences at a U.S. university. Their work suggests that international faculty may occupy a “third space” in which individual and cultural identity coalesce (and sometimes clash) with the norms of higher education in the United States. GuramatunhuCooper and colleagues argue that, while colleges and universities tout faculty diversity, the typical means of evaluating teaching effectiveness tend to reinforce U.S. cultural norms. The authors make suggestions for more expansive and inclusive notions of teaching excellence.

The present issue spans a variety of topics, methods, and perspectives. One common thread is that the articles originated from educators who care deeply about teaching and learning. I appreciate the effort and ingenuity that went into the work, and I thank the authors for their contributions. I am also grateful to the reviewers, copyeditors, and members of the Currents advisory board who contributed their time and expertise to the journal. These individuals are acknowledged in the back section of the issue. The online publication process could not be completed without Jonathan Tegg’s assistance with updating (and continuously improving) the Currents website. Many thanks to him.

The current issue is the final one of Dr. Linda Larrivee’s term as the executive director of Currents. Dr. Larrivee has been a longstanding champion of the journal and has actively contributed to each and every facet of the publication process. I truly appreciate

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everything that she has done to keep Currents going and evolving. I am grateful that she plans to stay involved as a member of the journal advisory board. Stepping in as executive director is Dr. Henry Theriault, the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs at Worcester State University. Dr. Theriault is an accomplished scholar and a passionate advocate for faculty research and teaching. I am looking forward to working with him, and drawing on his abundant expertise and enthusiasm.

Last but not least, I thank you and all of our readers for supporting Currents. I wish you all the best at the start of the academic year.

Until next time,

Benjamin D. Jee

References

Gallup (2022). Confidence in Institutions. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>