

Teaching

Find insights to improve teaching and learning across your campus. Delivered on Thursdays.

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SHARE

From: Beth McMurtrie

Subject: Teaching: After the Pandemic, What Innovations Are Worth Keeping?

This week:

- I share readers' stories on what pandemic-driven innovations they have come to love.
- I encourage you to share your own stories of innovative teaching practices.

- I point you to stories and opinion pieces about teaching you may have missed.

The New Normal

In recent weeks we've been asking our Teaching-newsletter readers what pandemic-driven innovations they want to keep around even after campuses open up again, hopefully as soon as the fall.

Many professors are eager to teach in person again. But they have also found that some parts of their work with students are more effective online. Who needs to spend time and money trudging to and from campus when you can just open up your laptop and hold office hours, host a guest speaker, or run a tutoring session? Readers also told us about some more-fundamental changes that they felt had made them better teachers, including flexible policies and an emphasis on making connections with and among their students.

Here are some highlights:

Flexibility with due dates and grading. Flexibility and leniency have historically been problematic words in higher education, raising the suspicion that faculty members are “going easy” on students. Yes, many professors did scale back their requirements during the pandemic. But several readers told us that they realized that being flexible, such as with deadlines, is not the same as giving students a pass. Rather, it's a sign of trust that students want to do their best but can't always meet a particular schedule.

Kari Morgan, a teaching associate professor at Kansas State University, wrote in to say that during the pandemic she decided that all late work would earn full credit, a policy she plans to keep.

“The majority of my students (I teach 100s of them) have turned their work in on time, and those that don't are truly grateful for this policy,” she said. “I have asked my students if it bothers them that people who are late get the same credit as students on time, and none of them care about the ‘fairness’ of this policy. I do have some assignments I really DO want to be on time (for example, work I want done before students come to class). In that case, I am going to explain WHY I want the work to be on time, and I may take off points (minimal) for late work.

“Treating students with respect and care builds trust,” she continued. “This serves as the foundation for learning. It also allows me to focus on the ‘big’ issues, and not the nitpicky issues. I mean, really, if I am not going to grade at the strike of midnight, why does it matter if their work is a bit late?”

Taking time to make connections. Several readers told us that they had built time into their classes to simply talk to students, and that the approach had paid off in ways both expected and surprising. Some used prompts to start conversations, or began open-ended discussion to allow students to share what was on their minds. They knew these chats would help build connections within their virtual classrooms. One unanticipated benefit was that it helped them better understand the competing pressures in their students’ lives. Combined, these strategies led professors to see the link between engagement and learning.

Clay Shirky, vice provost for educational technologies at New York University, wrote in to say that greater concern for student engagement, check-ins before and at the end of class, and “greater awareness of the vagaries of students’ outside lives” are all strategies worth keeping.

“As we start teaching online, the need to think harder about ways of getting the students talking, not just listening, is one of the first things that became apparent in digital instruction,” he said. “For me, it initially seemed like I was having to do things online that compensated for the kinds of student engagement I got for free in person, but as I went along, I started to realize that a specific focus on creating student engagement would benefit my in-person courses as well.

“My bet,” he continued, “is that the biggest shift from Covid will not be any one tool or technique, but a broadening sense that engagement is not merely something that students ‘bring to class,’ but is a result of the environment of the class itself, and that environment can be designed to better support or encourage engagement, whether online or off.”

Online tutoring and other student-support services. Several readers noted that when you make it easier for people to connect, it turns out more are willing to do so.

Rachel Halverson, chair of the department of modern languages and cultures and a professor of German at the University of Idaho, wrote about her experience.

“For years, we have paid advanced undergraduates to serve as tutors for lower-division language courses,” she said. “Very few students availed themselves of this ‘free service.’ For the tutors themselves, it was essentially being paid to do one’s homework. When we pivoted online last March, we moved tutoring to Zoom as well. Tutors reported increased usage. This spring tutors have been willing to offer Zoom tutoring in the evening and/or on weekends, since they can do so from the comfort of their dorm room, apartment, or home. They now report that there is at least one student at every tutoring session. Definitely a keeper!”

Laura Trauth, a history professor at the Community College of Baltimore County, wrote in to say how important this kind of flexibility is for students with a lot of outside obligations.

“Students who work and care for family members,” she said, “cannot always come to campus to meet with an adviser or with a librarian, tutor, or writing coach. Having these services available both face to face and virtually will enable more students to use them.”

Virtual workshops. It’s not just students who like virtual meetings. It turns out faculty members do too. So writes Karyn Sproles, dean of faculty development and director of the U.S. Naval Academy’s Center for Teaching and Learning, or CTL.

“We have gotten double or triple the attendance we used to have,” she said, “and the workshops have been even more interactive through chat and small groups. I encouraged faculty to use the chat throughout the workshops, and they did. Not only did they answer questions we asked them to respond to in chat, but they asked questions, answered each other’s questions, and posted links to resources.

“Having the CTL workshops online,” she continued, “has allowed us to support the faculty’s pivot to online teaching not only by having topical workshops but also by modeling best practices in online teaching and having them practice those strategies throughout the workshops. When they are using the chat or polls or doing a small group exercise, they experience the effectiveness of these techniques even as they are learning to use them.”

Online guest speakers. Professors have discovered how much easier it is to invite guests to class when it’s handled remotely. Andrea Bixler, a biology professor at Clarke University, in Iowa, wrote about her experience.

“I know I could have been doing this for years, but I was never forced to, so I never did,” she said. “Now I have guest speakers from around the region (and they could be from much farther afield) join my classes to discuss various topics. Likewise, my environmental-studies students can gather remotely with the local Sisters of St. Francis for intergenerational conversations about sustainable solutions and service-learning projects. Although in some ways these meetings might have been more effective in person, they would have been very difficult to schedule, even with the quick commute across our small town. Also, even with everyone burning electricity to power their devices, it’s probably less carbon emissions than driving.”

What Changes Are Worth Keeping?

You’ve heard from your peers. Now we would like to hear from you: Which pandemic-inspired teaching changes should colleges keep? Your ideas don’t have to be classroom-specific. We’re interested in responses about academic support, technology, and curricula, too. [Use this form](#) to share your thoughts. Thanks!

ICYMI

- Many instructors are covering less content this academic year than before. Maybe that’s a good thing for students, writes David Gooblar, in this *Chronicle* [advice](#) piece.
- In this [post](#) on the Learning Scientists blog, Carolina E. Kuepper-Tetzel explains the benefits she and her co-author found in temporarily withholding grades from students to help them engage more with feedback.
- Was your campus one of the many that skipped spring break this year? If so, Jane S. Halonen and Dana S. Dunn provide commiseration and coping strategies in this *Chronicle* [advice](#) piece.

Thanks for reading Teaching. If you have suggestions or ideas, please feel free to email us, at beckie.supiano@chronicle.com or beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com.

—Beth

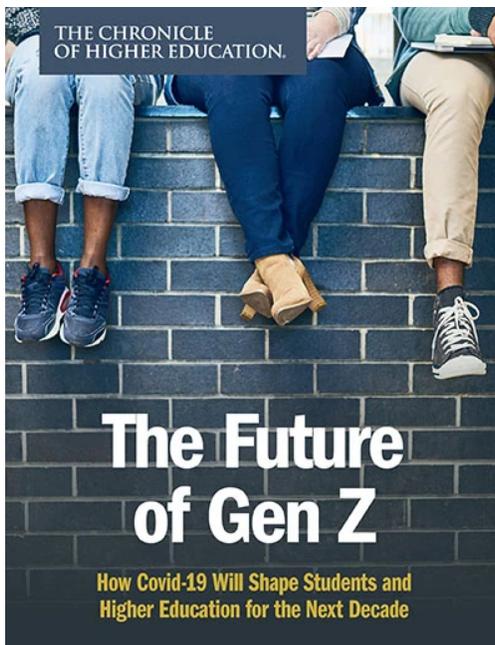
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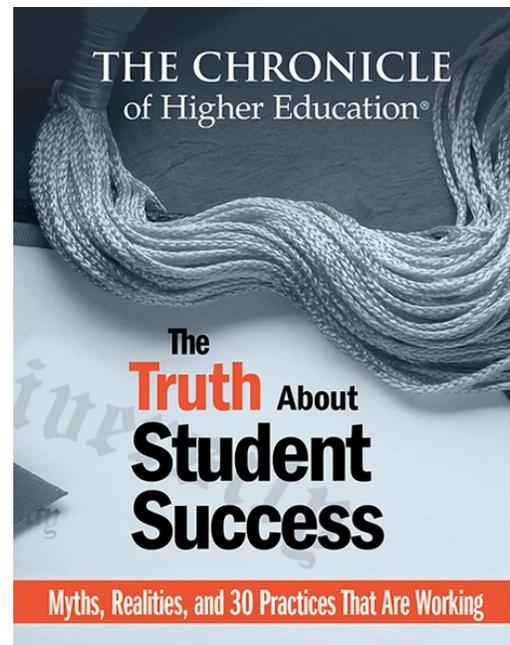
Beth McMurtrie

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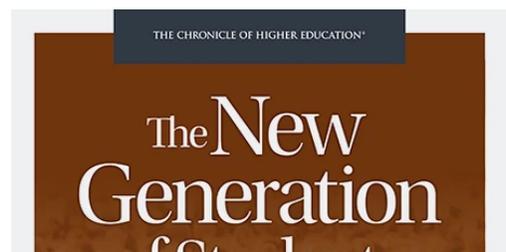
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The Future of Gen Z

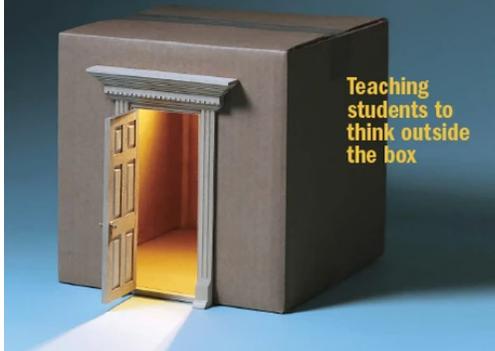


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