

# Teaching With Hope During a Pandemic

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

Those of us who are responsible for educating students are facing a monumental crisis.

Returning to teaching this fall has forced many in higher ed to completely rethink their work. I know I have. I've taught classes in person since the mid-2000s. Starting this fall, I've moved my teaching entirely online. Even though I'm teaching familiar courses, it feels like I'm starting over.

It's important to note that not all higher ed workers have had to rethink their teaching—we have much to learn from online and distance learning experts. Most of us are latecomers to online teaching. For example, Flower Darby, an instructional design expert, has written a series for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on online teaching.

But for me, and most of my colleagues, everything I know about pedagogy is in question: How do I form relationships with students, watch them grow over a semester, help them form relationships with each other and make sure they're OK? How can I do those things from afar?

Furthermore, requirements and expectations are changing rapidly: our knowledge about the virus and its transmission, our institutions' dictates about how campus will look this fall (all remote? all in person? a hybrid?), our governing bodies' rules about contact hours and more. Teachers struggle to reframe their courses, while administrators struggle to keep up with these rapidly changing instructions from on high.

How do we, as higher ed workers, create new ways of teaching and learning amid a pandemic? How do we implement changes quickly without short-changing our students? How can we be prepared to teach and support teachers and students amid the chaos?

Is teaching still possible at all?

## Hope, Mission, Passion

In 1998, long before any of us could imagine the situation we now find ourselves in, two professors of college writing, Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald, asked that very question: Is teaching still possible? With that question as a guide, they set out to breathe new life into teaching in "an academic culture where teachers' days seem, if not numbered exactly, at least increasingly hard-earned, [where] the future may seem bleak and the past irrelevant."

They wrote *Reason to Believe: Romanticism, Pragmatism, and the Teaching of Writing* "in order to revitalize [composition and English studies], to reinvigorate its work with the sense of hope, mission, and passion." Although their book focuses on teaching writing, it is helpful to "any classroom teacher who wants to keep his or her teaching alive year after year." The book is over 20 years old, but it takes on new relevance now when *hope, mission and passion* are likely to be sacrificed in order to keep classroom doors open at all.

The heart of their argument is a theory of "romantic-pragmatic rhetoric," a marriage of two 19th- and early

20th-century philosophical traditions. Romanticism, which emphasizes individual inspiration, has a U.S. version that is more socially oriented: "For North American romantics ... self from the beginning was created both socially and individually" rather than just individually. Pragmatism is a philosophical movement that insists that the theoretical be tested against experience, and that experience be used to craft new theories.

Taking this social romanticism and pragmatism, the authors coin romantic-pragmatic rhetoric: a way of looking at the world—at teaching in particular—that marries the highest pedagogical theories with the most grounded teaching methods and student experiences.

In a time when (most) of our highest pedagogical theories have been thrown into disarray, our new teaching methods are untested and our student experiences are online, we need to think about what really matters. Right now.

## Is Teaching Still Possible?

Early in the book, Roskelly and Ronald write about how some teachers "resort to 'expediency,' doing what's necessary to satisfy colleagues, administrators, school boards, principals, testing agencies, without thinking very much" about why they chose teaching in the first place. Roskelly and Ronald are sympathetic to both reactions given the difficult working conditions teachers face.

Indeed, Roskelly and Ronald provide many examples of teachers who do things without giving much thought to *why* they do those things—that is, those teachers had little theory to support their teaching choices. At the same time, however, the authors warn against theories handed down from on high that are not tested on the ground, "theories [that] only compete with one another for dominance and never negotiate with practical 'lore.'"

As I read their book, I considered how much of my course planning is focused on expediency: meeting the contact hour requirements of my institution, working within the constraints of the technology at my disposal and so on. We are all under a lot of pressure to meet deadlines and expectations, to prove that we are not sacrificing "rigor" when we move teaching to remote experiences. Both administrators and faculty are facing restrictions handed down to us from above, requirements we must meet for our students.

It may feel like there isn't much we can do to force those above us to adjust their views, which may be true. But we can be conscious of what we're doing day to day by testing those theories against our experience with students. We do have the power to adjust small things. And, we can keep records, so we can provide real feedback to those making the big decisions when it is possible to do so.

*Be ready to shift and change rather than be rigid.*

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She gives her students the credit for fueling new ideas. “They’re in the trenches and see things differently than I do,” she says.

Prior to COVID-19, the SRVC saw twice as many students coming in for advocacy and help over the previous year. “It [the new location] really made a difference in access.” Since February, Wyandt-Hiebert has pivoted to offering online programs. But many students have elected to continue their therapeutic work in their local areas.

“We’ve been responding [to sexual assault] for decades, and it’s a natural evolution to what we do,” she says. “Now that we have the facility and the center, the possibilities are endless.”

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### **#BlackInTheIvory Documents Anti-Blackness in the Academy,** *continued from page 8*

because it became a way for many Black faculty and students to receive affirmation and validation. It reveals how racism is widespread. Furthermore, it confirmed for some that their experiences are not unique, as many Black people in various fields, at different ranks and in different types of institutions have very similar experiences.

While #BlackInTheIvory is relatively new, Davis and Woods have already had to contend with the erasure of their work. For example, a *JSTOR Daily* article on the hashtag did not include the names of Davis and Woods as creators, although a correction was later issued. Also, others have attempted to use the hashtag for financial gain without seeking the permission of Davis and Woods. They have now trademarked the hashtag and set up a Twitter account and a website, including merchandise and a donation program for Black graduate students.

The hashtag continues to thrive on social media, and Davis and Woods hope to honor the contributions of #BlackInTheIvory participants by maintaining this virtual community. The work by Davis and Woods illustrates the power of social media to amplify the joys and concerns of Black academics at all levels.

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### **MOVEABLE TYPE: Teaching With Hope During a Pandemic,** *continued from page 9*

#### **Looking and Looking Again**

The most important advice from Roskelly and Ronald’s book is this: Be ready to shift and change rather than be rigid in your thinking about teaching.

They write of “looking and looking again, examining your suppositions, theorizing about practice and practicing your theories” as a teacher. As I design my course, as you design your courses, as you help your faculty prepare for the fall, as you help students negotiate this new terrain, take their words to heart. As the terrain shifts, we must be prepared to reexamine decisions we have made. We must be prepared to look and look again as our choices—our theories—are tested against real-life experience. And then, modify our theories and test them again. It’s time to be nimble, because our work is constantly changing.

Ideally, we’ll bring these newfound skills with us into the future. We’ll be better higher ed workers because we learned to look and look again. We’ll be ready whenever disaster strikes or a new challenge comes along. Roskelly and Ronald can teach us the skills we need to be educators amid a pandemic. Who would have guessed?

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### **PROFILE: Freeman Leads Lafayette Through Unprecedented Times,** *continued from page 10*

systemic racism,” Freeman says.

#### **Looking to the Future**

Moving forward, decisions will be based on thorough data and information about COVID-19 and how institutions will be able to respond with the appropriate health and safety standards.

Working from home, Freeman has spent the past few months studying the scientific information and conducting Zoom calls with other ADs across the country. Lafayette doesn’t have summer classes, but the coaches have maintained contact with the student-athletes with reference to mental health and physical conditioning.

How the strategic plan will change or evolve due to COVID-19 remains to be seen. The parts that involve engagement, fundraising and building on recruiting are on hold.

“We have much work to do in terms of addressing the full impact of COVID-19 on our strategy moving forward,” she says. “For Lafayette College, I would like to see us make significant progress on our plan to create a championship culture. I would be pleased if two or three years from now we have a consistent appearance in championship games and are bringing home trophies.

“I would hope that we have a strong community where our student-athletes feel that we have a diverse and inclusive environment and that we have done our fair share of the work to improve upon that in terms of having openness of conversations, awareness of language and an eye for trying to recruit more diversity to our teams, to our coaching staff and to our staff in general,” Freeman says.

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### **Big East Conference Announces BE the Change,** *continued from page 11*

and our focus has been on bringing in young people who are diverse, so we can give them a year of conference experience that could help fortify their chances of getting jobs in the sports world when they graduate.”

Ackerman hopes these initiatives have an impact within the Big East Conference as well as on intercollegiate athletics at large. This involves programming that engages coaches, administrators and the presidents of colleges and universities.

“We’re a high-profile conference,” says Ackerman. “Conferences can, through their visibility, help set the tone and in that way send important messages, not only to their schools, but to others ... to effect positive social change. [They can] have concrete steps and commit to a sustained effort over time.”