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The Teaching Innovation Institute: Faculty Development through a Spirit of Play

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While the act of teaching is often very public and performative, the work that undergirds it—the brainstorming, researching, lesson planning, and reflecting—is often done alone. The COVID-19 pandemic lent an additional layer of isolation to our instructional labor, especially during the initial months when many of us, both instructors and students, conducted all our work from home. At UK's Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT), we have gained even more appreciation for the degree to which programs such as faculty learning communities, faculty fellows, reading groups, and workshops can provide much needed opportunities for building community and making connections across the disciplines all the while exploring innovative pedagogical approaches.

In Spring 2020, CELT launched the Teaching Innovation Institute (TII), a year-long experience for a small cohort of faculty to (1) develop digital and instructional skills to increase student engagement and success, and (2) apply digital and multimodal pedagogies as part of an ongoing, reflective teaching practice. The intellectual framework of the Institute aligned with the then-nascent Smart Campus Initiative at UK, which provided all incoming first-year students with an iPad, Apple Pencil, and keyboard. This initiative meant that students were entering classes with a device that held great potential for digital access and engagement in learning, but that also was potentially unfamiliar to instructors. By linking instruction about the use of the device itself with higher-order considerations of teaching and learning behind the use of various technologies, CELT sought to equip faculty with the instructional skills and pedagogical frameworks to leverage the device as a vehicle for enhanced and innovative learning.

To capitalize on its cross-disciplinary cohort, the Teaching Innovation Institute prioritized sharing, reflection, and experimentation. Practicing a spirit of play and inquiry, participants collaboratively explored innovative pedagogical approaches and considered potential applications in their own disciplines. Just two months into the Institute, however, our community also became a space for real-time problem solving and support with the emergence of COVID-19 and the shift to emergency remote instruction and, later, to a mixed-modality fall semester. While challenging, these developments led to an even stronger sense of community and support as participants continued to pursue the goals of the Institute.

This issue of *Greater Faculties* features a series of flash essays written by Teaching Innovation Institute faculty participants to document their learning and instructional experiences and to share their innovations. While each account is as individual as the faculty member who authored it, they all trade in the Institute's ethos of learning through community, conversation, and play.

Prioritizing Community Through Play

To pull participants into the exploration of digital and multimodal pedagogies, TII encouraged a spirit of play and experimentation. The Institute, like most of CELT's work, approached the challenges of teaching with questions rather than answers to engage participants' curiosity and expertise. Our use of play also served as a foundation for a supportive and reflective community of practitioners. Play and curiosity were both key steps in the process of supporting faculty as they sought to innovate their course using pedagogical frameworks and new technologies/applications to enhance the accessibility of their content.

While there is no consensus definition of playfulness (James and Nerantzi, 2019), the use of play in learning is heavily researched in the realm of pre-K-12 and higher education. We utilized some of the principles of the pedagogy of play in TII, particularly those that use "playfulness" as a mindset of "openness," setting aside pressures of self-importance and mastery in exchange for a willingness to be "surprised" (Leather, et. al., 2020). The pairing of playfulness as a learning strategy with a

variety of theoretical underpinnings for TII allowed for an empowering of the participants to begin as beginners, try out new ideas and technologies, and follow their curiosity to decide what might best inform their teaching innovations.

Rather than provide prescriptive recommendations we included a mix of pedagogical frameworks such as active and collaborative learning, hybrid pedagogies, critical digital pedagogies, and decoding the disciplines. Hands-on encounters with digital technologies and unfamiliar applications brought about shared moments of play, discovery, and productive challenges. These sessions were often loud, full of energy and questions, and occasionally untidy at first glance. Some instructors were well-versed with the application and helped their teammates, while other groups bonded over the shared experience of confusion or problem-solving. These moments helped to foster a sense of exploration and empowerment. The resulting atmosphere invited faculty to lean on each other and to try new methods and tools as they considered how they might enhance their own teaching.

The arrival of the pandemic illuminated the value of TII as a teaching community as our remaining activities, and the entire university, had to move online. Virtual sessions quickly became spaces for sharing, troubleshooting, and applying the lessons of the Institute to the emergent challenges of teaching during the pandemic. Members of the cohort later cited the fortuitous opportunity of enjoying a supportive, interdisciplinary faculty community at such a stressful time. One noted that TII was "instrumental in helping me weather the academic storm created by the pandemic."

As instructors, we often fall back on the methods and tools that are most comfortable, especially when confronted with new classroom challenges. Reactions to the TII experience revealed that our focus on play as a means of exposing instructors to different applications and technologies encouraged a willingness to try new things. Our technology-agnostic approach, in which there was no perfect application or device, encouraged many members of the cohort to look critically at available digital tools and make their own choices based on their own instructional needs and objectives. They were encouraged to use the bits that seemed most useful and jettison the rest.

Instructor evaluations after the institute offered evidence of the power of a collaborative community where play—experimenting together, asking questions, being curious, and, even, failing—was valued and encouraged. Participants noted the challenges but also the structures of support we built around them to make these encounters more fruitful. One participant, who openly acknowledged some skepticism about digital pedagogies early on, noted that the experience helped instill a sense of confidence in trying new things, stating that "I agreed that I felt overwhelmed at the workshops. That was not an issue with the workshop, but rather my own discomfort with technology. But being put in that position, surrounded by support has forced me to stretch."

The curated moments of play also helped participants deepen their understanding of inclusive pedagogies and digital pedagogies over the course of the experience. One instructor admitted that, for instance, "my conceptualization of digital pedagogy has changed in that I see opportunities for more collaboration and group work within a digital context. I was unaware of and/or did not appreciate this previously." The experiences of TII gave them a sense of confidence in using those strategies in their own classes, having experienced them as a "student" themselves in the workshops.

Instructors also praised the cross-disciplinary make-up of the TII community; one reflected that "sharing ideas across disciplines was so helpful for opening eyes to new ideas...building a new network of colleagues to reach out to in the future [was] one of my favorite parts." Instructors new to the institution or who had not yet found a group of like-minded teachers to exchange ideas with found the community particularly valuable. That community, built on questions, inquiry, and play served as the incubator for creative and responsive teaching during a challenging moment in education.

Introduction to Essays

The following essays are organized into four themes based on their focus and featured interventions. The first selection of essays, "Digital Assignments for Real-World Application," centers on the idea of using digital technologies to facilitate assignments that require students to apply their content knowledge to real-world problems. Here Jennifer Cowley explores the design of a "night report" assignment that paired audio-recorded prompts and subsequent sessions for collaborative problem-solving to simulate challenging, real-world scenarios faced by many nurses in the field—the handing-off of patient care from one shift to another. Students in her nursing class found the activities to be an important bridge between the didactic lecture hall and the hands-on nursing clinical. Emily Croteau shares her plan for scaffolding a biology project that helps non-science majors practice communicating scientific findings to public audiences. Her use of open-access resources, publicly shared data, and free infographic creation software in this assignment ensured that all students could access the tools they needed for success. R. Louis Hirsch outlines his assignment design that asked plant pathology students to use their technology resources to engage in timed simulations mirroring scenarios they might encounter in the field.

The second section of essays, "Increasing Access and Interaction," explores instructional additions that sought to increase student access to challenging or complex concepts. These essays consider intellectual, emotional, and economic accessibility of course content and materials. Christopher Huggins outlines the use of digital tools to make historically difficult content approachable. His criminology students used iPads and Google slides as a virtual lab space for applying rational choice theory by photographing examples of "Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design" and then explaining them to their classmates. Likewise, Blanche Bong Cook outlines a web content creation assignment designed to help her law students encounter the human side of the often-abstracted subject of human trafficking. The assignment facilitated much needed conversation and collaboration among law students who often study and prepare individually. Lastly, Gail Hoyt describes her strategies for making economics content more accessible and tangible by converting analogue resources to digital versions compatible with the student iPads. She also mentions her strategies for adding digital instructional videos to accompany those analogue resources.

Several instructors in TII used collaborative, cloud-based applications to curate intentional spaces for student interaction. Essays within section three, "Cloud-based Applications for Collaborative

Learning," offer several suggestions for using that technology for facilitating small group assignments, feedback exchange, conversations, and brainstorming. Farzad Taghaddosi describes his use of Microsoft OneNote for collaborative learning and meaningful feedback. Students used OneNote as a canvas for drawing concept maps and planning solution strategies. Similarly, Christy Brady, Heather Campbell-Speltz, and Andrew Byrd all share their models for the use of Google applications, like Docs, Jamboard, and Slides, to house and organize student collaboration in vastly different disciplines. These digital collaborations proved particularly important during remote learning and in in-person courses where students had to follow social distancing protocols. These cloud-based softwares, and the devices students used to access them often became the sites for creation, imagination, and application. For instance, Nancy Jones describes asking students to use their iPads to build storyboards, film their own silent films, and edit them into final projects. Sarah Vos explains how she curated group challenges using Google Slides to model important thinking processes in her U.S. Health Systems course. These challenges also cultivated moments for guided student engagement and interaction in a classroom where COVID-19 precautions had increased physical and social barriers.

The fourth and final section of essays, "Instruction in Different Modalities," takes a broader view of teaching during the pandemic. Rather than sharing individual assignments or activity designs, these instructors examine some of the realities of leaning into the digital realm of instruction and the strategies they used to meet the resulting challenges. Allison Soult considers the impact of digitizing activities in her recently revised chemistry course, which features several hands-on, group challenges—something that became particularly challenging during the pandemic. Lee Ann Paynter discusses the theoretical and logistical components of allowing students to engage meaningfully with contemporary social issues, all while participating in the course in different multimodalities. Lastly, N. Jeff Rogers speaks to the challenges of remote learning as a space for facilitating students' interactions with the content and connections to the intellectual community of the classroom.

During the first year of the pandemic, we witnessed an immense amount of flexibility, creativity, and compassion on the part of our faculty and instructors. The Teaching Innovation Institute was designed to introduce faculty to emerging pedagogical strategies, offer hands-on opportunities to play with instructional technologies that support those strategies, and cultivate a community for reflecting on those ideas—all with the goal of supporting new innovations in their courses. What we did not know was just how much change and innovation would be asked of those instructors in the months ahead. As a part of that community, our teaching center got a front row seat to the unique and creative work of faculty leaders in the UK teaching community as they reimagined their assignments, courses, and teaching in a global crisis. The following essays offer snapshots of their innovations that will hopefully inspire other instructors looking for ways to meet their students where they are, to decenter the classroom, and to prioritize a constructivist approach and social connections among learners. In the coming months and years, scholarly and journalistic literature will be inundated with explorations of the impact of COVID-19 on the college classroom. We hope that many of those resulting works, like this one, will include stories and thoughts from the

instructors in the thick of the challenge. We are deeply grateful to the 2020 Teaching Innovation Institute cohort for their willingness to share their stories and wisdom.

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