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## Introduction for Spring 2023 Issue

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# INTRODUCTION

Nichelle Frank, Ph.D.

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Around the time that I was in second grade, I started keeping a journal. What began as an exercise in emulating some of my favorite fictional and non-fictional heroes (those who kept diaries, at least) later became a practice of regular self-reflection. Although my personal journaling tended toward basic “documentary” writing, it created a moment for me to think carefully about how I spent my time, with whom, and why. Journaling slowed me down and laid everything out in front of me. I always felt like I could see life more clearly that way.

When I was a doctoral student, a professor recommended keeping a “research journal,” which resulted in some mental breakthroughs and served as a good way to stay self-motivated. As a professor, I’ve kept both a research and teaching journal. Why all of this journaling? My hope is that it makes me more self-aware and helps me identify the best choices moving forward. But is it actually working?

It is this theme of self-reflection that winds its way through this issue of the *Journal on Empowering Teaching Excellence*. In the articles that follow, reflective work (granted, a more guided kind than the freeform journaling I describe above) emerges as a powerful tool for both teachers and students. In particular, the combination of evidence in these articles shows that self-reflection—on the part of instructors as well as students—improves student learning. Readers can walk away from this issue with valuable ideas for rethinking their roles and practices as educators as well as practical tools to implement in their classes. It is a dream combination of pedagogical thinking and practicality.

To kick off this analysis, “A Participatory Exercise in Developing Syllabi with Adult Learners” by Laneshia Conner (University of Kentucky), Nikki Jones (Spalding University), Jason P. Johnston (University of Kentucky) takes a critical approach to understanding pedagogy with adult learners by involving students in the creation of the syllabus for the course they will take. As such, the authors are questioning and challenging dominant ideologies related to the roles of instructor versus students while acknowledging student interpretations of intended course objectives and valuing those interpretations. For “A Participatory Exercise,” this included an analysis of the effects when educators shared the process of creating course syllabi with adult learners, specifically learners in a graduate social work course. As a result, students felt that their opinions mattered and learned a lesson crucial not just to social work but also to social relations—that is, what happens when power is less centralized.

In “On Becoming Online Educators,” Rachel Toncelli (Northeastern University) and Leila Rosa (EduCulture Consulting) analyze the experiences of adult learners and the educators who teach these adult learners, specifically the effects of online learning and teaching during COVID-19. The crux here is that the authors were educating teachers in how to be online educators at the time that the pandemic had suddenly thrown them into learning the best online education practices as well. In other words, the authors were scrambling to learn what they were needing to teach and journaled as a way to engage in personal reflection throughout the process. Deeply personal, researched, and informative, this piece promises to guide readers in thinking about their own instructional practices, power, and potential. The authors conclude that online learning led to greater depth and stronger individual participation that they want to translate to in-person learning environments as they “redefine what participation looks like.” Additionally, the authors advocate for more collaboration among faculty and more institutional support for such collaboration, including in the tenure process.

“Crisis Meets Opportunity: Empowering Faculty when Returning to the Higher Education Classroom” by Nicole Luongo (Saint Peter’s University), Michael Finetti (Saint Peter’s University), Kimberly Case (Saint Peter’s University), Jay Garrels (Saint Peter’s University), and Renee Evans (University of Miami) explores higher education as the

COVID-19 pandemic declined and instructors re-entered physical classroom spaces. Based on a survey of higher education faculty, the authors explain that teachers who implemented emergency remote teaching reflected upon what they had learned and empowered themselves with these pandemic teaching experiences as they entered physical classrooms in Fall 2021. While the threat of the pandemic evolved (and could continue to do so in the future), so must approaches to teaching during crisis. Among the successes outlined herein, the authors recognize the uses of new technologies for communication and instruction, addressing equity issues, and adding more inclusive practices to their classes. While many factors influence the ability of instructors to implement ongoing changes, including whether they have institutional support to participate in professional development opportunities to learn new best practices, the authors conclude that the experiences of the faculty during the pandemic can lead to more inclusive learning environments.

Jessica M. Parks' "It's not always poor decisions': Shifts in business student's attitudes toward poverty after completing SPENT" shifts our attention to the power of SPENT, a digital poverty simulation, in introducing students to the experiences of those living in impoverished situations. This article examines four themes in students' attitudes toward poverty: (1) laziness and poor decisions, (2) multiple causes, (3) low wages, and (4) importance of education. In order to understand student learning as a result of using SPENT, the author examined reflective essays about the simulation activity that students had submitted. Parks notes that a simulation like SPENT aligned students' views with a lived reality. Parks' study is an inspiration and justification for not just SPENT but also the development of other such simulations and assignments.

In "Promoting Student Reflection Through Reflective Writing Tasks," Elena Taylor (Utah State University) presents a generous selection of prompts used to promote student learning through a variety of written tasks. Taylor argues that assignments like reflective journals, reflections on writing assignments, reflections on teacher and peer feedback, writing-to-learn activities, and letters to the Reviewer can translate to various teaching contexts. To demonstrate the effectiveness of these assignments, this article provides samples of student work for each assignment type. Notable in the samples are the detailed descriptions that students include about their research and writing processes as well as looking ahead to methods they might implement for improvement in future work for the course.

Beyond the individual contributions of each article in this issue is their combined power in supporting the use of reflective work in higher education, both as educators and learners. Indeed, as the articles demonstrate here, educators are themselves lifelong learners who benefit from time spent reflecting. Moreover, it is not just what instructors choose to do that creates effective learning but how their students perceive the learning experience as well. So please excuse me while I go journal for a while about what I've learned from these articles. Will you join me?