

From Burnout to Burning Rubber

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This section of the paper summarizes the author's contributions to the LLL panel presentation at the PanSIG 2022 conference held at the University of Nagano in July 2022. Joseph Dias, Andrew Reimann, Natsuki Suzuki, Catherine Takasugi, Chiyuki Yanase, Paul Nanton, David LaHeist, Nena Nikolic, and Mitsue Allen-Tamai each shared their personal approaches to replenishing energy and enthusiasm in the classroom as the COVID-19 pandemic begins to show signs of waning.

Flip the Script

The pandemic shook up old teaching practices and forced teachers to question values, beliefs, and pedagogical strategies. By flipping the script in our minds, from one that feared and resisted the changes to one of exploring possibilities, some significant growth and creativity emerged. The uneasiness and grief that emerged from the pandemic cannot be overstated, however, once some sense of stability was restored many teachers were able to tap into the advantages and beauty of alternative teaching styles and approaches. Going forward it is time to ascertain how to maintain some of these positive changes as we drift closer to pre-pandemic rules and standards.

COVID-19 gave educators a chance to re-evaluate and re-center their goals and values. When safety and security were seemingly wiped out from underneath them, teaching core subjects such as reading, listening, or grammar in the same pre-pandemic ways seemed suddenly irrelevant and often ridiculous. Addressing students' mental health and honoring an environment of care and compassion necessarily became of primary importance. This brought to question why we had perhaps let these values tacitly slide to the background in

the first place. For me, this questioning ultimately resulted in a deliberate designing for joy, reflection, and kindness in the classroom. Eventually a balance of rigorous educational content encased with humanistic tones emerged. Overall, I have grown as an educator, am teaching more creatively, and am more attentive to student wellbeing.

Concrete examples of how this materialized in practice are described below.

International speakers, those residing abroad who could speak directly to the topic at hand, no longer seemed impossible to 'bring' into the class. With Zoom being the platform for educating, a guest speaker who lived next door and one who lived across the globe were suddenly equally approachable. After my students read a chapter from author Susan Sanford Blades' book *Fake it so Real*, I was able to bring in the author from Canada to discuss with my students via an interview style interaction. According to the students, this was a highlight for the course as it provided a somewhat unpredictable and 'real' exchange in English about a topic with depth and meaning. It was a powerful and novel experience for both the author and my students. I am encouraged to attempt similar exchanges in the future whether we are predominantly online or not.

One of the assignments in a seminar course that I teach asks the students to go to an art exhibit of their choice. In typical years, I am flexible on how this can be defined and carried out. During a pandemic, I had to be infinitely more creative on suggesting how my students could accomplish this task especially in relation to issues of viral safety. As physical spaces where art is displayed were predominantly inaccessible, exciting virtual spaces were becoming available. Some of the most famous and amazing art from all over the world became viewable through virtual tours. Using virtual technology, as a class we visited Le Louvre in Paris, an opportunity that I and my students may never have the opportunity to experience otherwise. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a rapid move toward global accessibility in many fields beyond education and we as educators now have new and incredibly valuable resources to enhance the educational experience of our students. With all the technological re-imaginings that have occurred since the onset of the pandemic, it is important to continue to push the boundaries of

possibilities while maintaining a focus on meaningful learning rather than novelty.

The instigation for re-thinking educational possibilities came from the utter shake up that happened during the pandemic, however, now that classes have mostly returned to physical classroom settings, I find a strong personal resistance to simply returning to what existed as 'normal' classroom interaction in the pre-pandemic era. Since 2020, we were forced to try new technologies, employ new strategies, and solve different problems daily. For me, an insatiable sense of pedagogical curiosity, a bit of adventure, even a smidge of fearlessness has emerged. Currently, classrooms do not seem as bounded as they once were, and as a result I use the space differently by shifting the desks, podiums, and people more frequently and unexpectedly. Expanding beyond the classroom by using virtual opportunities, on campus points of interest, and outdoor learning spaces on and beyond the university, have become our expanded zones for learning. With these small shifts, I see students more engaged with each other, excited to learn and share their ideas, and unscripted authentic interactions are more often taking place.

The pandemic has brought fear, fatigue, disappointment, and uncertainty, but it has also changed our views of how to engage with our students and even what might be envisioned as an educational encounter. Frightening for some, exciting for others, 'normal' classroom practice is now a relatively blurred concept. Rather than lamenting the limitations and inconveniences brought on by the pandemic, it seems that it is time to flip the script and ask what educational possibilities have materialized, what useful skills have been developed, and how can we maintain this openness to trying new teaching styles and techniques. There is no going back to pre-pandemic ways of teaching, and as tough and long as this COVID-19 educational era has been, it is time to embrace the changes and enjoy the possibilities.