LDTE 5100: Innovative Pedagogy

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15 May 2022

# The Value of Experimenting with Innovative Pedagogy

As the world adjusts to what is referred to as “the new normal,” it seems more inevitable that the education field will need to meet the diverse needs of students by providing access to diverse modalities of instruction such as asynchronous online courses, hybrid courses, and [hyflex](https://ctl.columbia.edu/resources-and-technology/teaching-with-technology/teaching-online/hyflex/) courses, on top of reopening in-person courses. From those who dropped out of school to wait for the reopening of in-person instruction to those that thrived in the online educational environment, and everybody in between with varied experiences, students have been changed by this pandemic, adjusting their lifestyle and reexamining their goals, values, and personal expectations. In so doing they may have questioned the capability of the education system to help them meet their personal goals or reassessed the value of education entirely.

College enrollments have declined with community colleges experiencing a larger dip than most. Undergraduate enrollment is down 6.6% since Fall 2019 while community college enrollment is down 13% ([Nadworny, Jan. 2022](https://www.npr.org/2022/01/13/1072529477/more-than-1-million-fewer-students-are-in-college-the-lowest-enrollment-numbers-)). In California, community college enrollment is down 20% since Fall 2019 ([Zynshteyn, Mar. 2022](https://calmatters.org/education/higher-education/2022/03/community-college-enrollment/)). Those that have decided to return to in-person instruction, have experienced greater levels of disengagement than they did at the height of the pandemic ([McMurtrie, 2022](https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-stunning-level-of-student-disconnection?emailConfirmed=true&supportSignUp=true&supportForgotPassword=true&email=albummer%40yahoo.com&success=true&code=success&bc_nonce=vewbi2rtdi82b8mmgbyitr&cid=gen_sign_in)). While professors may too be feeling the burn out of the pandemic and the anxiety of the still unclear post-covid educational landscape, the time is nigh for innovation in the classroom, in all its modalities, to engage students in their education and inspire the belief that their education brings value to their life.

## **Importance of Innovative Pedagogy to Teaching and Learning**

Innovation begins with understanding the needs of students in relation to their environment and the changing society in which they seek to thrive. Meeting these needs requires educators to not only reassess the norms of lecture and assessment, but to also creatively experiment with a variety of innovative pedagogies. By teaching through the lens of such pedagogies, educators can begin to reimagine learning that effectively engages all students, and perhaps, in the process, helps them develop the confidence to shed outdated and inequitable norms of the education system and teaching profession.

## **Innovative Pedagogies**

Below is a list of twenty innovative pedagogies, ranked in order of effectiveness. While such ranking is from the perspective of a California Community College English professor, all educators will find value in experimenting with them.

1. Crossover Learning
2. Playful Learning
3. Making Thinking Visible
4. Incidental Learning
5. Student Co-created Teaching & Learning
6. Place-based Learning
7. Learning by Argumentation
8. Engaging in Data Ethics
9. Artificial Intelligence
10. Enriched Realities
11. Chatbots
12. Computational Thinking
13. Formative Analytics
14. Learning with Robots
15. Offline Networks
16. Escape Room
17. Big Data
18. Stealth Assessment
19. Online Laboratories
20. Esports

## **The Pedagogies at the Top of the List**

As an English professor for an open-access community college, learner diversity, equity, and inclusion are my foremost concern when experimenting with educational pedagogies. My teaching style can be boiled down to three qualities—flexible, culturally relevant, and socially engaging. These qualities are informed by an intentional effort to develop equitable teaching practices, and while many of the pedagogies listed above speak to these qualities, Crossover Learning, Playful Learning, and Making Thinking Visible more readily support enacting these qualities on several levels.

### **Crossover Learning**

Crossover Learning allows for teaching to be culturally relevant to diverse students in the classroom by balancing formal and informal learning; that is, leveraging what students engage with in their environment outside of class to amplify learning inside of class. For example, in my critical thinking and writing class, I teach logical fallacies, and one assignment that can access student culture asks them to document the logical fallacies that they encounter in their community, whether through conversations with their friends and family or engagement with various forms of media. This type of activity allows students to work within their own cultural context and leverage classroom material to understand and bring value to their daily lives. Another example activity that draws on Crossover Learning asks students to engage with their community by visiting a museum exhibit in their area or exploring the urban street art in their city and responding to questions prepared by the instructor or in collaboration with students. This allows students to bring their cultural environment into the class to engage others; this activity may work particularly well with distance education classes as students may be living in different geographical locations, allowing the instructor to leverage ample student diversity to amplify learning.

There are many activities educators can create through the lens of Crossover Learning pedagogy, and educators can also consider how their selection of course readings can provide opportunities for students to bridge learning that occurs outside of the classroom with in-class learning. As an English instructor, I find selecting books (usually novels or short story collections) with international themes that bridge national cultures provides ample opportunity for “crossover” assignments as many students can identify with navigating different cultures, whether that means bridging home culture with American culture and/or with academic culture. I place Crossover pedagogy at the top of this list explicitly because of the ample opportunities it opens up for students to bring value to their education and the education of others by exploring and sharing their relationship to their own lives and culture, an ingredient I find necessary to equitable teaching.

### **Playful Learning**

Playful Learning situates the learner and the learning process at center focus. This pedagogy places second on the list because it encourages engagement with the act of learning, decenters the emphasis on completing polished assignments, and opens up ample opportunities for social engagement. Playful Learning also requires the teacher to be flexible and open to learning as well; that is, given that the learning process for each student varies, the teacher’s role becomes more that of a coach encouraging the process and providing the necessary resources more so than tying students to prescriptive formats for learning or even prescriptive time frames. Playful Learning also acknowledges the social-emotional needs of learners since the intersection of play and learning necessitates exploration and making mistakes. This can in turn allow students to feel comfortable taking risks. Enacting Playful Learning, therefore, begins with the intentional and deliberate goal of building a community where learners can trust their peers to support their learning process.

One innovative pedagogy that is not on the list but fits right into Playful Learning is Applied Improvisation Pedagogy, which basically adapts improvisational theater routines to a variety of learner-focused settings, from classrooms across the disciplines to businesses and work environments that leverage collaboration to increase productivity. For example, one improvisation routine I have used in the past is called “7 things.” Here’s how it works:

1. The instructor arranges students into groups (I do groups of seven) and has them stand up and form a circle;
2. one student begins by turning to the left and asking a peer to list seven things that fall into a certain category--for instance, “name seven colors” or “name seven movies”;
3. as the learner names seven things, the group shows their support by keeping count, verbally saying “one, two, three” and so forth; the group also supports the learner by whispering an answer or clue if they get stuck in order to help them through their list of seven things;
4. Once the learner is finished, s/he turns to the left and asks the next group member to list seven things of a category of their choice, and this process continues until all have participated or as long as the instructor sees fit.

While this activity can simply be seen as a community building activity, it more importantly enacts social-emotional learning. Learners practice speaking in front of others and without a prepared script, actively listening to their peers, and supporting one another in the learning process. Once learners understand the routine, educators can adapt the routine to focus on the course curriculum. For example, if students are currently reading a novel or a textbook chapter, educators can ask learners for their questions to focus on that material. Learners can ask general or specific questions, such as “name seven things you remember about the reading” or “state seven annotations you wrote” or “name seven characters” or “name seven things about a character” or “name seven things about the setting.” Students may want to hold the reading material or notes as they do this, which is a great idea, especially since some students may not have done the reading. But they can still participate in the learning activity and be supported in doing so. Jonathan P. Rossing and Krista Hoffmann-Longtin (2016) explain that “Applying improvisation practices in the classroom disrupts the hierarchical model of the knowledge holding teacher and passive learners and, instead, appears to cultivate an environment in which all learners call on one another for help and share responsibility for the learning process” ([Section: Improv in the Classroom](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tia/17063888.0035.206/--improv-ing-the-academy-applied-improvisation-as-a-strategy?rgn=main;view=fulltext)). Improvisational theater routines such as this one allows learners to take risks and make mistakes because they are actively supported by their peers and in a fun, non-judgmental environment.

There are several other improvisational theater routines that can be adapted to the classroom, as well as the workplace. One such routine that is adaptable to both are the [“Yes, and” routines,](https://www.hooplaimpro.com/resource/yes-and) in which learners play dialogue games that require responses to begin with “Yes, and,” the purpose of which is to maintain validation of ideas and add on to them in a collaborative manner; this can be done to create a collaborative story, to process an abstract concept, to decode a graph, or to discuss a complex issue or problem. Katherine McKnight ([Sept. 5, 2017](https://edcircuit.com/teaching-learning-begins-with-yes-and/)) explains that “Yes, and,” is rooted in the idea that all ideas are embraced. In other words, whatever I bring to the table or suggest is not negated. It’s embraced and from there we build and add to it.” Mcknight (Sept. 5, 2017) goes on to explain that while these routines may at first seem like “simple exercises,’ they are designed with a “complexity that becomes a catalyst for critical thinking.” With all these routines, educators are advised to first facilitate the routine in a low-stakes, playful manner, such as is described with the “7 things” routine. Once learners are comfortable with the routine, educators can then adapt them to their particular learning goals. (See [Beginners Improv Exercises](https://www.hooplaimpro.com/improv-exercises-games-formats.html) for game ideas).

While educators can see the relative value of strategies that encourage inclusive and productive discussion in the classroom, we can also acknowledge their value in other contexts of our work, such as at committee or task force meetings, or any context in which collaborative problem solving is essential. We as educators are not much different than the students we teach in this respect. Among our peer groups, ideas can be shot down, or lifted up. Negativity can stunt the conversation. And it is not infrequent that the more assertive voices can end up taking the floor, particularly those that are resistant to change. Jonathan Rossing and Krista Hoffmann-Longtin (2016) discuss this issue in higher education (HE) and the value of adapting improvisational theater games into meetings with faculty and administrators, arguing that “improvisational theater training (or “improv”) has the potential to cultivate the creativity and collaboration required to respond more effectively to complex problems in HE” (Section: “Gaming” a Committee). They explain that the “Principles of improv, such as supporting your partner, listening closely for opportunities, and giving ideas the opportunity to develop, can engender a culture that promotes innovation and creativity” (Section” “Gaming” a Committee). Routines such as [Meet and Greet](https://www.hooplaimpro.com/resource/meet-greet-walkabout), [Story Swap, and Yes Based Conversations](https://www.hooplaimpro.com/improv-exercises-games-formats.html) can be leveraged to promote collaboration among faculty and administrators and create a culture that engages in innovative ideas rather than meeting them with suspicion and doubt.

When we consider “Playful Learning” in the context of a virtual learning environment, we can imagine that a certain amount of knowledge of mobile and digital games would be required. Games that require collaboration, such as online video games, could serve as a conduit to build community among peers, particularly if learners are required to collaborate on a group project for the course. And while it may be difficult to adapt Applied Improvisation Pedagogy to the online, asynchronous classroom in the same manner as the in-person classroom, educators may find value in creating discussion board assignments around the principles of “Yes, And” as well as drawing on other strategies to infuse their course with Playful Learning values that promote exploration, making mistakes, collaboration, and risk taking. Reflection assignments in which grammar mistakes are invited can ease student anxiety and promote authentic exploration. Creating essay assignment rubrics to emphasize critical thinking goals and de-emphasize format and proofreading (that is, those qualities that signify “polished” assignments) can promote creativity and the value of process over product. And essay writing that takes intellectual risks such as proposing bold solutions or experimenting with language should be encouraged and cultivated without deterrents such as point deductions for non-standard grammar usage.

### **Making Thinking Visible**

This third pedagogy centers student engagement with their own learning process and in a collaborative manner. Making Thinking Visible can be described as social metacognition, which supports social emotional learning. There are a variety of strategies to support students sharing their learning process with one another, and this approach is particularly effective in the virtual classroom. For example, one activity I assign when teaching the research paper is called a “research process reflection.” Students conduct research on their chosen topic and then write a reflection discussing their experience. They illustrate how they selected their topic, crafted “key words,” and determined which databases and sources to use. They also discuss how they adjusted their research strategy when they got stuck and how their essay ideas evolved as a result of the research experience. Students not only reflect in writing on their learning process but share it with others in class, along with some of the research they found. In this way, learners support each other and learn from each other, making what would otherwise be a solitary and “invisible” critical thinking experience visible to the community of learners. This activity, and others that center on social metacognition, is particularly effective in the online classroom because students do not verbally share their work with others but post it in a discussion board where their peers have time to read, think, and constructively respond to one another’s reflections, and they also have the opportunity to review them whenever they want.

Another activity that is particularly effective in the online classroom is social annotation, the act of sharing annotations of a text with peers. In the in-person classroom, learners can perform a routine called “Think Aloud” in which they read a text and verbalize their thoughts as they do so, “making thinking visible” or put another way “making the invisible visible.” However, in the classroom, this activity was always met with confusion and limited productivity, most likely because the skill of speaking spontaneously is also at play here but not called out directly. In the online classroom, however, digital tools that facilitate social annotation, such as [Hypothesis](https://web.hypothes.is/), make this activity significantly more effective. This digital tool allows educators to upload a text for all students to read and annotate; and students can read and respond to each other's annotations. Students not only process a text in collaboration with one another but are exposed to a diverse range of perspectives through essentially being able to see their peers’ thinking captured on the digital page. Activities that “Make Thinking Visible” facilitate social emotional learning particularly well in the online environment.

## **The Pedagogies at the Bottom of the List**

The pedagogies at the bottom of the list do not necessarily indicate that they are ineffective in all contexts; I placed them at the bottom of the list because they do not appear valuable in my context, as a community college English professor, or appear to be pedagogies that still need time to develop. With that said, the bottom three on my list are Online Laboratories, Stealth Assessment, and Esports.

Online Laboratories are discussed mainly in the context of science classes, but one could consider an “English Lab,” though this would only be in name as the pedagogy of Online Laboratories does not function as a support component to a class, which is usually how so-called English Labs are run. English Labs, in the contexts that I have encountered them, are a support component of a core course that provides lessons to reinforce the skills taught in the core course; it also provides tutoring opportunities and general help with homework. This functions more as co-requisite support, and while the online modality of co-requisite support does have its value, it is markedly different than Online Laboratories in the sciences. For this reason, I place this pedagogy at the bottom of my list.

Stealth Assessment is an intriguing idea; it functions under the idea that student assessment is conducted in the process of learning instead of as the end result of it. The underlining principle of this pedagogy is very valuable, as it potentially eliminates deterrents to accurate assessment, such as test anxiety. In Stealth Assessment, students play video games that assess critical thinking and other skills as they play, essentially providing assessment data to the professor without learners even being aware of being “tested” (so to speak). In context with an English class, it is hard to imagine how a video game would function to assess essay writing and to do so without bias or error given that personal expression and critical thinking, done well, is so nuanced. There has been some effort, however, in this direction, with the tool [TAALES,](https://www.linguisticanalysistools.org/taales.html) which essentially assesses vocabulary sophistication and diversity. This may help in some respects, but so much more is assessed with essay composition than vocabulary use, such as critical reading and thinking, organization, and development. Stealth Assessment is a good idea but needs to be developed and refined further in order to function in the English classroom. For this reason, I place Stealth Assessment at the bottom of the list.

Also at the bottom is “Esports,” or leveraging competitive online sport video games in the classroom. I actually like the idea of bringing Esports into the class, but I am also hesitant. This approach seems like it would pander to a certain crowd, such as those who are into competitive video games, so I can imagine this actually creating a rift between students and causing some to disengage. While Esports may provide one option to help facilitate community between some students, I see it more as one resource among many as opposed to a central pedagogy to infuse in the class.

## **A Note on Technology Integration**

Technology integration can be leveraged to drive innovative approaches to teaching. As described above, “Making Thinking Visible,” an innovative pedagogy that centers social metacognition in the classroom, was made, in my experience, more effective through the use of digital tools, such as online discussion boards and online social annotation tools. In the [SAMR framework for technology integration](https://www.edutopia.org/article/powerful-model-understanding-good-tech-integration), this would be an example of redefinition, given these types of activities would not be possible to facilitate with the same depth or effectiveness in a physical classroom. Negotiating pedagogical practices and assignment design goes hand in hand with negotiating technology, as such technology can be the catalyst for innovative and effective practices that would not be possible otherwise.

## **Final Reflection**

I was posed with the question of whether I would want to be a student in my own classroom. While I could humbly say “yes” at this point in my career, it is not without reservation or reflection on the elements of my teaching that need improvement, whether associated with the skills that I wish to develop, the experience with technology that I wish to deepen, or the engrained rituals or habits of the teaching profession that I wish to shed. I would feel comfortable as a student in my class because I feel I am clear on the requirements and expectations of the coursework, and that my course is organized and easy to follow. I also make a concerted effort to be positive in student feedback, provide opportunities for revision, and respond to student emails. Some things that I want to work on are developing innovative approaches to assessment and grading and expanding my knowledge of technology to increase student engagement and efficiency.

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