



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Accounting for Courage: Four Course Design Recalibrations

Mindy McGarrah Sharp, *Columbia Theological Seminary*

Blog Series: Praxis: The Responsive & Expanding Classroom

November 18, 2020

Tags: student learning | self care | course design | student care | workload calculator

Im/Possibilities of Learning in Crisis

Teaching and learning in times of crisis require ongoing recalibrations. In 2020, both teachers and students have quickly implemented new skills, accessing each other and learning activities in new and different ways, trying to plan one step ahead even as fresh challenges emerge. It is difficult to focus. Grievs, losses, and longings multiply.

Intentional listening to students and colleagues about learning in 2020 and reflecting on my own experiences, I keep encountering an impossible seeming calculation of teaching and learning + writing + editing + administrative work + service commitments + helping children with online school + yearning to see relatives across quarantines or in nursing care facilities + daily chores, eating well, and exercise + attending to other aspects of life beyond work. All this is unfolding within unprecedented restrictions and constrictions of time, space, and breathing, alongside the blurring lines of work, school, and home.

Students and I need more than a workload calculator to recalibrate course design. As we think ahead to another semester of teaching and learning in conditions of raging pandemic, social-political, climate, and economic crises, what would it look like to account more for courage on the front end of course planning?

Course Design with More Than a Workload Calculator

Course design involves a careful calibration of learning objectives, readings and other learning resources, assignments, learning activities, rubrics, and more. Workload calculations inform course designs that support collective thriving, individual learning, access to and expectation of good work, advancement in a course of study, vocational development, career preparation, exam or credentialing readiness, and academic topics and tools that translate beyond the course itself.

A workload calculator estimates the amount of time it will take students to complete assigned course work and, by extension, reasonable workload for instructors. Workload calculators not only account for the volume of reading, writing, and exams assigned in a course, but also difficulty, density, and complexity of each. Newer versions account for more widespread online and hybrid teaching, including discussion board assignments and variable synchronous course contact hours.

Workload calculations help teachers design courses that justify credit hour tuition without surpassing the maximum amount of work that it is reasonable to expect for students to complete the course. Reflecting on student and teacher time and energy this year, what is a responsible amount of work to expect for academic credit during the triple pandemic of COVID-19, the unmasking and reorganizing racialized terror, and climate crisis, all in the context of mounting political tensions?

Workload calculators support good course design, yet only calculating for number of pages and hours of writing and meeting can neglect context. Teaching online in a pandemic, even using a workload calculator, I am realizing that something else is missing. No one teaches or learns outside of context(s). In addition to accounting for time for appropriate amounts of reading, writing, testing, discussing, and studying that inform good work, course design must also leave room and account for courage.

Four Course Design Recalibrations

Emergency pedagogical shifts in response to pandemic contexts have uncovered workload factors unaccounted for even when workload calculations are adjusted for rhythms of online teaching and learning. In addition to reading, writing, and assessments, what would it look like to also account for the extra courage it takes to engage the learning process in times of crisis?

#1 Acknowledge Grievs: Making Room for Ambiguous Meaning in Course Design

Grief is present in and around learning for all teachers and students. In addition to the hundreds of thousands of deaths from and exacerbated by pandemic conditions, grief work is needed to notice, acknowledge, and learn to live with deaths, losses of connections, rituals, traditions, plans, and severely altered mundane rhythms of life connected to both special events and everyday practices, from eating and laughing to moving about the world.

Grief takes multiple, often compounding, forms from mourning deaths to deep disappointments to an uneasy, ambiguous depth of longing. Can we add time to the workload calculator to

acknowledge griefs and to celebrate the possibility of learning in the midst of loss? Courses are not and should not be therapeutic spaces. Neither are they made up of unfeeling, unaffected partners in the work of school.

While stage-theories of grief are both beloved and disputed, many grief researchers consider meaning-making to be a long-term goal of grief work. We are teaching in a time of loss and longing borne of disillusionment, unrest, uncertainty, disease, and division. Neither teachers nor students know yet what it all means, what meaning we will make as we reflect back to this historic and challenging time.

Yet, we yearn for something to make sense, words that fit the moment even when there are often no words that feel adequate in the face of temporary and permanently tangible absences. For every assignment submitted late, I have started first with “wow, look what you created in this midst of so much uncertainty and loss!” before other logistical implications.

Where in your course design could you make room to name losses and acknowledge longings? Where can you acknowledge and celebrate the miracle, possibility, and power of learning in a context of compounded griefs?

#2 Expect Anxieties: Making Room for Purpose in Course Design

A recent news headline reads, “Sleepless Nights, Hair Loss, and Cracked Teeth: Pandemic Stress Takes its Toll.”[1] In addition to griefs over specific losses and longings, anticipatory griefs also abound in every class(room) today. Anticipatory grief is an experience of grief triggered by realizing a potential loss or imagined future that is suddenly unstable, cherished dreams and long-held plans that are not going to happen as expected, if at all.[2]

Anticipatory griefs compound already heightened anxieties, fears, and rising mental health challenges related to the unending and shifting nature of current pandemic conditions. I asked a colleague how students were doing in their class and they responded that the good students were doing well. Upon further reflection, it seemed that students who were relatively well were doing better, while many otherwise good students were struggling mightily.

Many factors compound the already well-founded anxieties students and teachers carry to and from class every week. We know that it can take much more energy to focus when new and old trauma wells up in the body.[3] In the past few months, I’ve received stories from students anxious about GPA- and credit-enrollment-dependent financial aid and other scholarships, ordination or other credentialing processes that remain unpaused, first generation and international students whose sending communities are proudly counting on student success, graduation requirements, internship trajectories, and other concerns about future employment opportunities.

Can we add time to the workload calculator for breathing, time for students to muster up the courage to ask for help, and time to model and respond with non-anxious collegiality along the way? I have started each synchronous zoom with breakout rooms asking students to share how

they are doing. I have added moments of silence and asked students to share what practices are keeping them going. I designed a credit/no credit midterm meeting in small groups to assess material, review assignments, and take the temperature of the class.

Where in your course design could you make room to reinvest in the purpose of learning? Can you plan flexible-yet-framed learning environments with habits of brief checking in and referrals for more in-depth care needs prominently posted on learning management systems? Where can you acknowledge the harm and fear of harm in mental and public health by connecting to resources of sustaining purpose already present in the course subject matter?

#3 Support Ritualized Focus: Making Room for Energy Investment in Course Design

Crisis conditions challenge structures of time, space, energy, reflection, attention, and collaboration that affect learning environments. It takes longer to focus. Private and public spaces are shared in ever-shifting ways. It takes extra energy to negotiate daily decisions. Thinking out loud now has the added pressure of being recorded in video or posted text. Going to the class or store or dinner is a risk-benefit analysis.

How have work-spaces and rhythms changed for you and your students? What is better and what is missed? For courses meeting on campus or outside, new rituals of attention unfold in shifting configurations of social distancing and communication patterns without familiar patterns of facial expression and tone. For courses meeting online, it is both necessary and can be overwhelming to prepare and process one more zoom meeting after another after another, one more discussion board post or response, one more attempt to get ahead of email.

Let us add time for the transition into the workload calculator and support the extra configurations of time and space needed to learn. How do your courses support thinking in a distracting context of divided attention? Might you share some of your own practices that support your focused attention with your class and/or invite students to share with each other what is working to help them stay engaged in learning?

#4 Invite Translations: Making Room for Connections in Course Design

"If we can't find ourselves in the readings *this semester*, we just *can't* and *won't* do it anymore," students have shared in recent advising sessions, detailing the extra time and labor it can take to translate learning activities into something that matters for their lives in a time where life is unmasked as more precarious than we sometimes feel.

In addition to the extra effort needed in times of uncertainty to make space in one's home for teaching and learning, it can also take a great deal of effort to learn alongside deeply held dreams and visions. It takes effort to weave someone else's dream into your dream when there is no opening to shared dreams or the coexistence of multiple dreams.

Many graduate students have to research words and phrases as new vocabularies accompany advanced study. Some also translate every assignment into second or fifth languages. Beyond

literal linguistic translation, reading also requires careful interpretation accompanied by a felt sense of distance from or relevance to the reader's experiences.

Different students often work a lot more or less to translate the reading on these interacting forms of engagement. Twenty pages of assigned reading could take equally bright and motivated students twenty minutes or five hours. Let us add time for translation to the workload calculator and invite every student into this work rather than foisting it as unaccounted-for extra work shouldered by only some learners.

Extra effort is worth it to connect the learning activity to the student's worth as a learner. However, in times of crisis, there is little room for extra and the alternative is often mimicry, an out of body, out of spirit practice of learning oneself into someone else's dream. bell hooks indicts course design that renders some traditions not good enough to be included, arguing for expansive course design in educational systems mis-oriented toward selective visibility.[4]

It is too much pressure to feel the world is on any one person's back, therefore let us foster opportunities for connection. It is too much pressure to fight for one's existence or the existence of a particular people, history, or dream, therefore let us foster opportunities for translation within our course design. Who is helping you check your course for opportunities and burdens of translation? How are you responsive to learning and shifting course design in response?

Accounting for Courage in Crisis Teaching and Learning

When filling out workload calculators for course design in crisis, instructors can't presume healthy, whole, living their best life, so-called typical students. Rather we are in a time of needing courage and grace with each other. Students and teachers are rightly on the edge needed to be vigilant regarding public health and safety concerns while also not normalizing crisis conditions.

In each three-credit hour class, I typically parcel out twelve total hours a week to course-related activities. In addition to time for reading, drafting, editing, attending synchronous or asynchronous class activities, and completing assignments, I've started allocating more time for thinking, more time for celebrating creativity in the midst of loss, reminding students and myself to breathe and be as well as we can be while checking on each other, carving out space and time to devote to learning in the midst of chaos, translating content that connects to dreams, and asking and listening to students and mentors on all of the above.

The total time devoted to writing and total pages read will be less, but I have already seen that learning that accounts for courage can far exceed expectations. Workload recalibrations that make room for grief, anxiety, ritualized focus, and translation add rigor and support courageous academic work with added opportunities for meaning, purpose, investment, and translation.

Courses that merely check off required boxes may have a place in the ecology of credentialled

teaching and learning among limited human beings. Some days this is enough, more than enough. However, it's not enough to fund a vocation. Some days, coursework serves as an escape from the world. However, a course of study also equips students to be change-makers in the world, even and especially in times of crisis.

Will we be able to look back at 2020-2021 syllabi and notice that learning is unfolding in extraordinary times? Teaching and learning in crisis are challenging; both teachers and students need courage and support. I believe that making some room for grief, anxiety, ritualized focus, and translation in course design is one concrete way to recalibrate course design for the courage we will need to keep learning through a chaotic time of stress and possibility.

Accounting for Courage	→	Practices of Recalibration in Workload Planning
Acknowledge Grief <i>name losses, honor longings</i>	→	Make Room for Meaning <i>create into felt absence; supply words where needed; acknowledge miracle and power of learning</i>
Expect Anxieties <i>acknowledge harm and fear of harm in mental and public health; refer</i>	→	Remind on Purpose <i>fund flexible yet framed learning environment with ready referrals; share practices of sustaining</i>
Support Ritualized Focus <i>negotiate space, time, and rhythms of attention</i>	→	Design for Investment <i>model in class rhythms; invite conversation/check in about what is working (and not) for you and for students</i>
Invite Translation <i>account for representation, language, and relevance</i>	→	Multiply Connections <i>audit syllabi and check in with students; ask for help; invite all learners to stretch</i>

[1] Aneri Pattani, *NPR*, October 14, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/10/14/923672884/sleepless-nights-hair-loss-and-cracked-teeth-pandemic-stress-takes-its-toll>.

[2] Andrew Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 51.

[3] Resmaa Menekam, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 13.

[4] bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 104. Amy Lonetree talks of it as the work of fighting for survivance in a well-supported myth of extinction (*Decolonizing Museums* [Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2012]). If we're accepting tuition, but

not teaching meaning-making toward more humane human beings, challenges Toni Morrison, then it's better to stop this business of education ("Sarah Lawrence Commencement Address," *The Source of Self-Regard* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2019), 71). Poet Mary Oliver suggests we'd be better off just copying the old books when there's no room for new comments (*Long Life* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), xiv). These wise teachers continue to help me reflect on the purpose and possibilities of learning.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/11/accounting-for-courage-four-course-design-recalibrations/>