

SPEAKER 1: I had radically underestimated the adjustment of being back on campus for students, for me, for our department. I had radically underestimated that all of us were out of practice being around other people.

SPEAKER 2: I was surprised by many aspects of how the semester unfolded. So it seemed to require constant reassessment and readjustment.

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MEGHAN MODAFFERI: So here we are again. It was December 2021 when we originally recorded this, and we'd just made it to the end of our first semester back to normal. But of course, last semester was anything but normal. And now it's 2022 and we're heading into another semester upended by a COVID surge.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: Through all of this upheaval and continual adjustments, one thing remains clear-- we ourselves have changed. We've learned new ways to teach and learn, and we're trying them out in new combinations once again. This is What We're Learning About Learning, a podcast created and produced by the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship, also known as CNDLS, at Georgetown University. I'm Kim Huisman Lubreski.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: And I'm Meghan Modafferi in for Joe King. In this episode, you'll hear from History Professor Chandra Manning, Linguistics Professor, Marissa Fond, and Biology Professor, Jennifer Fox. They'll share strategies that have worked for them and lessons they've learned from yet another unusual semester. This conversation was originally a panel hosted as part of a faculty development initiative led by CNDLS called Digital Learning Days.

It took place over two days in December of 2021. If you're interested in hearing more insights from faculty, check your podcast feeds for part two of this episode. In part two, we'll hear from five faculty about assessment strategies they've used for reducing student stress and anxiety. We have edited and condensed the conversations for the purposes of this podcast.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: We'll begin the conversation on the topic of technology, but the discussion will expand from there to include strategies for community building, how to adapt when things don't go as planned, and the challenges and payoffs of cultivating an intentional culture in your classroom. Here's Chandra Manning to kick us off. For her, an important takeaway in technology has been--

CHANDRA MANNING: Not to try to use technology to recreate things that we would do in person, not to try and make a technological version of what we think of as normal, but rather to use it to do things we couldn't do. Using Zoom to bring special guest stars to class, the author of one of the books the students read read to come answer questions and that kind of thing.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: And some strategies that originated as problem-solving tactics during

quarantine evolved into mainstays in hybrid and in-person contexts. Here's Marissa Fond.

MARISSA FOND: They were strategies that I really ended up importing from our virtual semesters. One use of technology that I've come to believe in really strongly is the use of Hypothesis via Canvas for social annotation of readings. Basically, you can set up an assignment in Canvas that the students don't have to log into anything.

They just open a reading and they're able to highlight passages and make notes on readings, and see what everyone else has had to say as they're doing the readings for class. And typically before a class meeting, I will go in, I'll answer questions, and it just gives me a little bit of a heads up as far as what students are thinking about as they're doing the readings. It adds a little bit of accountability to the process, because they know that they're taking in other people's thoughts on what they've flagged as important about the readings, and they're also contributing as well.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: Many faculty found themselves this semester in a hybrid environment, or at least in a semi-hybrid environment, as we worked to be flexible to accommodate students both in and outside the classroom at once. Jennifer Fox talks about how she managed this juggling act while also helping students build relationships.

JENNIFER FOX: As we all did this semester there was a student missing from any classes. And so I would have Zoom working, and I would assign a student in the course to be the liaison for that student. So it took one thing off my list of things to pay attention to during class.

And I think it actually helped the students connect with each other, because they could provide clarifications in the chat for each other, both the person zooming in, asking questions, and the person in the classroom who could maybe sometimes explain some things that the camera and the audio weren't quite capturing. And I think that that was actually really helpful, because it forced the student in the classroom to have to describe what was being presented and emerging from the diagrams that we were building together.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: Chandra echoed the value of making students accountable to one another.

CHANDRA MANNING: And the single biggest thing I learned was ways to make the students responsible to each other, because that made life more manageable for me and for them. Another thing that I did was create a collaborative notes document for students who couldn't be there on a lecture day. It was entirely voluntary, but any student who was willing to take their lecture notes in the Google Doc, one, they would get my feedback afterwards, because I would say, great insight or oops, looks like we missed something here.

I also gave them participation points. But then that collective, collaborative notes doc existed for the whole semester. So now at the end of the semester, anybody who wants to can read the

lecture notes from the whole semester. And again, it built a sense of connection between them, which I thought really mattered.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: An additional strategy for looping in remote students while creating study resources came from Marissa with her use of Google Slides.

MARISSA FOND: I would routinely release Google Slides on Canvas before we met in class. And so students would be able to take notes on the slides, so supplementing the content that was already there, and potentially share those notes with classmates who had to be absent. So it really allowed us to handle any kind of situation, whether I had students in the room, students on Zoom, students who were absent.

So it really wasn't the case that I would have slides with a lot of content that we would just then review in class. It was that the slides had a lot of different components that we needed to work with, so I wanted them to be available to the students. Because you can't just pop a link into the chat so easily for students to work with, now that we're hybrid.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: But tech tools weren't the only thing faculty carried over from their time teaching online.

CHANDRA MANNING: We all learned that when we were teaching via Zoom, and we had to really give thought to how we were going to have community emerge among our students. We couldn't just assume it would happen. But I found that some of the techniques that I did in that setting actually really made a difference when imported into the in-person setting.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: Chandra regularly facilitated a ritual called Rosebud and Thorn during her discussion sections. This allowed students to share something that had gone well in their week, something that wasn't going so well, and something they were looking forward to.

CHANDRA MANNING: It was a good eight minutes, sometimes 10 of class. And that was a trade-off for sure, but I was actually much happier making that trade-off than I was making the trade off of signing into 12 million things in order to have everything work properly. So that was a trade-off I was quite happy making, because I felt like that trade-off built a sense of connection between them that they benefited from in the moment, and also cumulatively over the semester.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: And for Marissa, keeping virtual office hours, in addition to some in-person office hours, allowed her to make the time to meet with each of her students and foster relationships.

MARISSA FOND: I make office hours mandatory for my 75-ish students, which means that the last week of my semester is brutal but good, because I really value that. A lot of students tell me, oh, I don't go to office hours. I'm never sure if I have a legitimate question. But if it's mandatory, those types of worries sometimes can be overcome. And it gives me an opportunity

to have that one-on-one time, especially with quieter students or students who are a little hard to reach, if they're not always attending in person regularly.

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MEGHAN MODAFFERI: In semesters requiring increased flexibility due to the potential for illness, absence, and so forth, things are bound to go wrong sometimes. But Jennifer reminded us things are bound to go wrong, even in the best of circumstances, and that can be part of the learning.

JENNIFER FOX: This is maybe more of my experience from teaching lab courses, where something goes wrong every time. And sometimes by design, but often unintentionally. And I think what I have learned is you just have to say, that didn't go right, that wasn't what we planned.

But what can we take away from it? Because that is, in fact, the academic process and the scientific process. But I think also not trying to pretend, oh, I meant to do that, because the students can see through that. But I think taking it as a learning opportunity, and just to say, OK, next year, what should I do for this lab?

And how should the students be collecting data? Or whatever the problem was, having the students become my collaborators in addressing the problem in the future has worked really well.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: Chandra Manning described a challenging situation she faced last semester. Students' disparate experiences, with some of them online and some in-person, contributed to a class climate problem that needed to be addressed. This situation wasn't easy, but it forced her to seek out some new strategies for collaboratively developing classroom norms that make space for students of all backgrounds.

CHANDRA MANNING: I really did have one of the more serious classroom climate issues arise in a graduate seminar this year. It was a very uncomfortable seminar for a little while, and a huge shout-out to Joselyn Lewis at CNDLS, because I turned to her to say, I need to address this really intentionally.

Maybe it would be a problem even in a non-hybrid semester, but in a hybrid semester, it's really exacerbated because we're not all experiencing things in the same way. And the steps that she suggested that I take, I did take, and I'll tell you what they were. And it was one of the best decisions I think I made that salvaged the seminar.

I hope it's not something I have to do with every class ever. But it's a case of, a lot had to go to do this, but it was important to do it. I put students in groups of two and gave them 20 minutes to talk to each other about what opens you up in group discussion, what shuts you down, and

what's one thing you wish everybody here knew about you.

So they had 20 minutes to talk to each other, and then each person introduced their discussion partner to the class, sharing what had arisen from that conversation. And that took a good 40 minutes one day. I just listened and took notes.

The next week, I came back and said, here's what I think I've heard in this conversation, and they let me know where I got it right and didn't get it right. And I said OK, from that we are going to create a Google Doc, a collaborative document together about the kind of environment we commit to creating for each other in class. Then at the end, we're going to create the steps to be taken if we don't abide by these commitments to each other.

That took a long time. This happened thankfully in the seminar that's forever anyway, so we had the time to do it, but it took a long time. And it wasn't perfect from then on out, but we did create that document. And as things arose over the course of the semester, the document was a clear, neutral place to go to for, what should our next steps together be.

Again, I hope I don't have to do that again. I hope that I don't have this experience again. But having had it-- and I do believe it was contributed to by the differing experiences of remote and not remote. Having had it, it did underscore for me the true importance, really, of dedicating intentional time to building the kind of climate we want in class, and to deciding that when it's not performing the way we want, it's important and worth the time to stop and address it.

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MEGHAN MODAFFERI: As we look forward to the spring semester, we asked these faculty to share their insights on what students need and how we can support them in our teaching and course design. And part of the answer seems to be about reintroducing valuable structures and boundaries, that these can be acts of care, as much as flexibility has been and will likely continue to be. Here's Marissa.

MARISSA FOND: I made it in a way perhaps a little too easy for students to join on Zoom, sometimes if they just didn't want to be inconvenienced by walking to a building. I get that. I do. But I think that for the overall success of the semester in the spring, one of my goals is to be very clear and intentional about how this is going to work, and to make clear that moving forward, there are these norms or boundaries, and it's not possible to do exactly what you might want on any given day. So I'm working through that on my syllabi for spring, for sure.

CHANDRA MANNING: And I do think that coming into the spring, it's time to start expecting those norms again if we're clear about what they are. And so I guess that's what I'll go into this spring with. I've let some norms go in these strange times. It's probably time to start bringing them back, but it's not fair to bring them back without some deliberate, intentional naming of what they are.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: So we're moving into the spring, carrying forward the best things we've learned from trying new technologies, from accommodating students both in and outside of the classroom, from building community in new ways, and working to heal that community when things go wrong.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: And with all of that under our belt, this spring semester is bound to be perfect, right?

CHANDRA MANNING: Things will go wrong. Two, you are going to learn anyway. And I think it was the most important thing that I said all semester, and I did best when I remembered that myself.

And I also think that might be something helpful for us to remember, even in semesters that aren't weird. So that was one of the revelations that this semester led to me, is that leading with the expectation of imperfection and the conviction that learning happens anyway might be a useful practice going forward.

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MEGHAN MODAFFERI: We hope this episode has given you some ideas for upcoming semesters, particularly this spring. For our part, the expectation of imperfection coupled with the knowledge that learning happens anyway has become our new mantra. This has been What We Are Learning About Learning. We are wishing you all the best for your new semester this spring.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: This episode was made possible by many people at CNDLS, including Molly Chehak, Meghan Modafferi, David Ebenbach, and Lee Skallerup Bessette. Big thanks to our guests, Chandra Manning, Marissa Fond, and Jennifer Fox. I'm Kim Huisman Lubreski.

MEGHAN MODAFFERI: And I'm Meghan Modafferi in for Joe King. Thanks for listening.

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