



What We Are Learning About Learning, S2 E1

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Allyson: I think, as we all know, there's been a major disruption to routine and structure and schedule, which is usually what helps young people thrive.

Antonio: Your freshman, regardless if they're coming from similar communities than ours, your freshman are kids that have been taking classes in the bathroom because there's no other space. A lot of them never got to visit colleges. They haven't stepped foot on campus. Like they have no idea what they're walking into. And there is a lot of fear.

Allyson: They're incredibly flexible. And I think they don't realize that they have that strength. So I think naming to them their strengths and their assets is going to be incredibly important. Because I think they feel like they've been drowning all year. This generation of kids is politically active, socially engaged on a level that even a few years ago I didn't see. And so, they want to know how what they're learning in school relates to what's going on in this world and making it better.

Kim: Welcome to episode six of What We Are Learning About Learning, a podcast about higher ed teaching and learning, 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.

Joe: And I'm Joe King. In this episode, we'll be looking back to learn more about what we can bring forward. We focus on what we're learning about learning from the pandemic and racial reckoning, and more specifically on what students need as they transition back to in-person learning in the fall. While a lot's unknown, we do know that after all that's happened pandemic, social unrest, and the persistent inequalities that plague our nation, we can't return to business as usual.

As award winning author and activist Sonia Renee Taylor put it, quote, "We will not go back to normal, normal never was. Our pre-coronavirus existence was not normal other than that we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, rage, hoarding, hate, and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment, one that fits all of humanity and nature."

Kim: All of our lives have been interrupted during the pandemic to varying degrees. Routines have been disrupted, impacted by loss, illness, racism, wildfires, global warming, and the need to prioritize caring for loved ones or earning money. For many, the interruption to in-person education was a new hardship that



required big adjustments, whereas for others, particularly those who have experienced social injustices, interruptions in learning were not necessarily new, but amplified.

Joe: Yet interruptions can also create opportunities for change, a chance to pause and reset, and space to reflect about what we knew before the interruption and what we know after the interruption. Rather than picking up where we left off, we can resist the temptation to go back to how things were and instead examine what we learned in between and use that to reimagine our teaching and redesign our courses. How might our courses look different post pandemic versus before and during the pandemic? How can we reground ourselves in new knowledge about teaching and learning that emerged during the pandemic? How might we heed Sonia Renee Taylor's call to stitch a new garment, one that acknowledges and weaves together the many threads of our students' experiences and meets them where they are?

Kim: In the first half of this episode, we talk with Georgetown staff about what last year looked like for students and what that means for us now. But those who were already in college last year are not the only students in our Georgetown community with a story to tell. This year's first year or last year's high school seniors also experienced an unprecedented and distinct interruption to their academic journey. In the second half of our episode, we will hear from three high school teachers from around the country who share what it was like for students at their high schools this past year and about how those experiences might influence first year students in the fall.

Joe: Some of what you hear will ring familiar and apply to students across the board, the importance of student agency, community, belonging, inclusivity, purposeful teaching. But there are new insights, like how much of student struggles are invisible to us, the connection between *cura personalis* and community, the importance of being actively welcoming, and not leaving yourself out of the equation as you think about needs and well-being. These insights and new questions can help us begin to unpack what some students have been through and what they and we may need in the fall.

Javier: I actually think that most of the times in which students showed resiliency and success were invisible to us this year. I think lots of people went through a lot of pain this year. And we didn't see it.

Kim: That was Javier Jimenez Westerman, an assistant dean in Georgetown College.

Javier: They didn't reach out to us. Maybe they wanted to, maybe they didn't want to. But they were so removed from us and the institution that they trudged along and they pressed on on their own and did what they needed to do. And that was bothering me actually, all year long. All of the things that I know are out there that just am not seeing and that I can't do anything about.

And the sense of powerlessness of this year is astounding. I don't think that we have that much more power when we're on campus. But this year really underlined the fact that really the agency is on them.



And we have to give them tools. And we have to give them choices and everything like that. But they're the ones, it's on them. And it was very stark this year. And it was very humbling in a lot of ways.

Joe: Javier's reflection underscores that for every story we hear, there are many we don't hear. And it shows how exacerbated those unknowns were for faculty and administration over the past year. But it also points toward the power of student agency and resilience, and the ways that our role is not always to fix things, especially since we won't always get the full picture.

But there's also crucial work to be done to bolster student agency, recognize how much responsibility falls on them, often behind the scenes, and provide the tools they need to respond to their challenges.

Kim: And the sense of disconnection that many felt last year didn't only apply to purely academic contexts. Here's Erika Cohen-Derr, Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs.

Erika: A lot of our students are going to come back to this environment and feel really insecure about who their friends are, who's got their back, what they can say, what they can't say. So I really want to attend to that in the years coming ahead.

Joe: Students have been challenged to remake themselves personally, academically, and politically this year. And there's a lot that's positive about that in terms of agency and purpose and growth. But there's also an increased need to cultivate a sense of belonging on campus for students who may feel extra vulnerable after last year. And at Georgetown, we often talk about belonging through the lens of *cura personalis*. Here's Jim Whitman, Director of Catholic Life, to explain.

Jim: *Cura personalis* is one of the 10 different values, Jesuit values and nation values, if you will, that we at Georgetown grouped together in the spirit of Georgetown. Today as a value in university life at our university particularly, it's about our shared responsibility for one another, grounded in the intention of the needs for the other, their unique circumstances, concerns, gifts, limitations, in order to encourage each person's flourishing. It's important to me to remember that the context is within the community. It is paying attention to the person. But it's within the context of the community.

Kim: For Javier, caring for the individual in the context of community can be about providing compassionate limits as much as it's about flexibility and care.

Javier: It's this balancing act of trying to figure out what that student needs, how to be flexible with them, how to really focus on what their individual needs are, but also what is appropriate and fair to the community. A student who wants an extension of three months on an assignment, maybe there is something about their case that warrants that extension. But maybe there isn't. Maybe they have had challenges all along and an extension isn't actually going to lead them to success. There have to be guardrails put into place.



Kim: For Don Undeen, the manager of the Maker Hub, Georgetown's Makerspace, where students and faculty can engage in hands-on learning and innovation, cura personalis sits at the intersection of creativity and belonging. And to this end there are some really intentional decisions that Don and his team have made that we can all learn from. Small shifts can cultivate belonging and make students feel more welcome than they otherwise would have.

So we started to think about, OK, well let's make sure that every single person that walks in the door is greeted, right? And we said, OK, well, we make sure that we ask every single person who walks in the door, is this your first time and never have you been here before? The key difference being that if it is your first time, your first answer in that space gets to be a yes instead of a no.

And then if it's yes, that's fantastic. Let's welcome you into the space as opposed to, no, OK, well you know you need to know some things before you can be a part. Really simple distinction, but we felt it was important. And it made a difference.

So everything we've done has been about thinking very carefully about what impact do these decisions that we make have on the people around us, the people who aren't around us, how do we make people want to be present? So you are always having to be thinking about who's not here, not just make the space great for the people who are here. But thinking carefully about who's not here and is there a pattern? And how do we change our actions.

Joe: To implement Don's approach in the classroom, it may be good practice to consider the course rosters year after year. Who takes the course and who is missing? And how might the syllabus or course experience contribute to who shows up? And when students get through your door, what are the small shifts that you can make to assure them they belong?

And even as we all look forward to going back to campus, we know there's much more work to be done when we all get there. Simply going back won't be the cure all in itself. Though it's an important start. But we can use what we know about Georgetown students and the culture at Georgetown to inform how we support students in that transition. Here's Jim.

Jim: While the experience is going to be great and the experience is going to be what they want. But the experience isn't going to solve all their problems. And that is something that we are going to have to be concerned about as staff and faculty is, what else is going on there? I'm afraid that the hyperactivity and overextension that often accompanies student activity will become the answer.

Maybe it's only one or two clubs. Maybe it's not being president of every group. Maybe it's where is your heart, where is your heart? And have some of that language, education of the whole person is about not just the mind, but it's the soul and the spirit and the heart.



Joe: And this might involve reflecting on who we as faculty administrators really are after this year. Don reflected on how we too have to be honest about what we're still struggling with, as well as what we've learned and where we're going.

Don: I have a routine nightmare where everyone is back in the Maker Hub and we're all really happy to see each other. And then I realize that no one is wearing a mask. And I'm trying to get them to wear masks.

And it's this recurring panic nightmare nightmares. It's like a weekly thing, not to share my trauma with you all, but like I know when people are back in here, it's going to-- that's what it's going to feel like for a bit. And I think we need to be looking out for our students, but also being honest with ourselves about our own sense of trauma.

Kim: One way he's tackling this is through design. He shared a project plan for one of his classes that's rooted in the demands of this moment.

Don: All of our activities are always about gift making or making something that's designed for other people to see and interact with. And as gently as possible just kind of reintroducing to them to interacting with strangers and turning strangers into friends. I suspect there'll be a lot of damage there, right? And a need to gently reintroduce them into the natural world. Same as I need it. I need the same thing.

Joe: And this gentle reintroduction can lead, we hope, to renewal and positive change throughout our campus and in our community. Here's Erika.

Erika: I am at my core a hopeful person, an optimist, and so I think maybe there are ways that we can take this opportunity to intervene or fix some of the things maybe around club culture or disrupt the norms that haven't been helpful. So I'm choosing to think about that and thinking about, how do we stabilize as we come back together.

Javier: What I'm thinking about is how to ask intentional questions about values and meaning. And what I mean by that is that I think, for me, speaking for myself, the pandemic forced me to re-evaluate what I want out of life, what I want out of my job, what I want out of my relationships.

I think a lot of people have had to have that dialogue with themselves. And I think I'm going to be very clear, just be like, I went through this whole like reawakening during the pandemic. Like did you go through anything like that? What did you discover about yourself?

And then start the conversation there to talk about what their academic goals and what their goals for being at Georgetown is going to be. Because I think-- I don't want to get too Pollyanna about this. But I



think if we can rescue something, a germ of positivity to give them and us to share and rebuild and regrow, I think that that's the way that I want to handle it.

Kim: Before we get into the next section, where we'll hear from high school teachers, a quick word. We'd love to hear from you. Please record a short voice memo for us answering the question, what are you learning about learning or what are you wondering about learning? We're interested in your thoughts, questions, stories, and ideas for future episodes. You can find the directions for sending us a voice memo on our website or in our show notes.

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Joe: Up to this point in the episode we've heard a lot about what our continuing students, faculty, and administrators will be bringing to their learning this fall. But what about students who will be starting their college experiences for the first time? What will they be bringing as they join our continuing students? Knowing the disruption that they faced in high school, we wanted to gain a better understanding of their needs. So we spoke with three high school teachers who are part of Georgetown's Pivotal Network, a network that works to support high school students traditionally underrepresented in higher education. Some of these educators' observations align with what you just heard, the importance of caring, belonging, community building, and at times, the invisibility of trauma and resiliency.

Kim: By highlighting what the last year has been like for these students and making that reflection part of our planning process, we hope to create conditions for learning and growth they don't just recover what was lost, but instead build something new, more meaningful, and more equitable. Let's begin with Allyson Even, a history teacher at KIPP UPrep in San Antonio, Texas.

Allyson: I think, as we all know, there's been a major disruption to routine and structure and schedule, which is usually what helps young people thrive. All of the sort of traditions and you know, rites of passage have been removed. Those sorts of aspects of learning just did not exist this year. And so I think kids have a really sour taste in their mouth about what is school and what is education. And so they've experienced a lot of loss in that way too and a lack of faith and trust in adults to know what to do and a lack of security and trust in terms of the future. Like we've told kids, like you will follow these steps in life. And then that got completely blown up in the last year. And so I think a lot of them are having trouble seeing long term and having faith in the things that we tell them await them in their future.

Joe: On top of these sorts of existential disruptions, high school seniors, like many of us, had to deal with a lot of physical disruptions too. Here's Antonio Gamboa, a science teacher at Gary High School in Pomona, California.



Antonio: Your freshman, regardless if they're coming from similar communities than ours, your freshman are kids that have been taking classes in the bathroom because there's no other space. They don't have any support at home for what they do. They have zero support.

And so the support that they usually have is with us. And the approach that most of us have is a individual teaching. We don't teach a group. We see the person, and we say, you need this and you need this and you need this and you need this. And through the year that they're with us, we develop a trust with them. They have to have that trust in us.

Kim: Additionally, many students faced increased responsibilities that pull them away from school during the pandemic. Allyson continues.

Allyson: A lot of our students, especially seniors, are working full time. They have sort of had this interruption to adolescence accelerated adulthood and really have taken on these roles, often because their families need them to, especially with the economy during COVID, people getting sick during COVID, and sometimes just out of choice like why would I be going to Zoom when I could be making money?

Joe: Allyson explained that this increased need to focus on financial and practical responsibilities, coupled with the challenges of a rapid transition online had the effect of casting education in a different light for some students.

Allyson: I think in a lot of ways this year learning has become so much more transactional in a way that, for me is very sad. And that it's very much about like, well, did you turn the thing in at some point? And so I think going into next year sort of regrounding and showing students that learning can be about community and about process and about experience, and not merely about documents being turned in on Google Classroom, I think is going to be really important for reengaging kids in learning.

Kim: One way to do what Allyson is urging here and help our students move beyond a transactional approach to education is to double down on purposeful learning, learning that connects to the real world and empower students to make an impact on it. Anne Severson, an English teacher at Excel High School in Boston explains.

Anne: It is like they want to know why. And I think the why this year includes why should I? Why should I enter into this? Why is this lesson, this lecture, this project, important or valuable or meaningful? And I think that I think that's how we're going to get kids is the why.

Antonio also explains how project-based or problem-based learning can help provide that sense of purpose while reaching across the curriculum and extending into the broader community.

The project has to have a purpose, a real actual purpose. And that allows you to be completely cross curriculum. So maybe one of them is doing 3D printing, while other one is doing this, while other one is



doing their research and the essay and the presentation. Our most successful project, it included the whole entire school.

We have reached out to the full community. We have reached out to the people in government. It worked. For us it's working fantastic. It's problem-based learning. It's an actual problem that students are faced with and they are asked to use their knowledge in bio or their knowledge in math and their knowledge in technology.

Kim: In addition to a sense of purpose, Allyson added that clear expectations are necessary for students to be successful, especially now.

Allyson: We need to have really clear / like what you were expecting from kids in the classroom, on campus, needs to be direct and it needs to be clear. And that is what is respectful. Do not make any assumptions that kids know how they're supposed to interact, learn, do anything in these spaces. Do not assume that they're just ready to snap back into academic expectations. Like academic expectations this year have been low in high school. And so it needs to be very clear what is expected of them.

Joe: But Allyson also pointed out that although academic expectations had to shift last year, student learning expanded into more informal areas. She shared a story from one of her former students, who's now an undergraduate student incorporating home life into undergraduate coursework.

Allyson: And she was like, I'd be in this class at Yale about-- she's doing like migration study or something. And she's like, I've got this Yale professors talking to me about like immigration. I'm sitting in Brownsville, Texas. I talk to my grandmother more than I've ever talked to my grandmother. And why did no one ever tell me that that was a source of knowledge and learning?

Kim: Allyson applied this insight to create connected learning for her students, linking the academic and the personal in profound ways.

Allyson: Based on my conversations with her, I did a community history project with my kids. And I said, like where are those opportunities for kids to actually use those relationships that they've strengthened? This year, kids spent a lot of time with their families and a lot of time in their own communities. And so how do we capitalize on that and not lose that? And actually keep that as part of our learning? And keep that as part of our classrooms? Even if kids are now back on campus, let's keep those ties strong. Because I think that is one of the successes and strengths that kids bring, is they have pride in their communities. They've supported their families. They have incredibly strong relationships.



Joe: Antonio emphasized how important cultural heritage is to many of his students, and therefore how essential it is for universities to make room for diversity, cultural expression, and true belonging.

Antonio: It's personal to me because I am an immigrant. So I went through what most of the students go through. Because one of the main things they have is fear. They have fear to fail. They have fear to not doing the right thing. They have fear to not doing the thing that that is going to make their parents proud. They have fear to lose their cultural and heritage and background.

So there's all this fear. And so now they're being encapsulated in this home, where there's no support. There's no guidance. And the teacher that was there to speak with them, to tell them all this, to clear their doubts, to guide them, it has disappeared. So they are in a situation where, they adapted to the new. And unfortunately, many didn't.

But those students that are going to go on to school, to your school, you've got to remember, they did adapt to it. They did succeed. And they showed tremendous resiliency. But the thing is, once they get there to your school, the one thing that could make potentially difficult for them is that now they have to adapt to totally new stuff, where they cannot even share their background. They cannot share their cultural. So one of the suggestions that I would say is, perhaps because of what we went through this year, it might be a good idea to have a place where they can just express themselves, validate their life.

Kim: And maybe that's really the core takeaway in a nutshell. *Validate their life.* After all that's happened in the last year, it is more important than ever that we design with the whole person in mind, validating and incorporating their experience in order to promote their learning. Anne reflects on how that might begin, not with academics, but with the personal elements and with intentional community building.

Anne: One of the guidance counselors came to me and made a plea as I'm working, thinking about next year to not start school with school, to not start with lessons. And that has come up with someone else in our school this week, who walked in with like a written plan for some culture building for our freshman and a reset button. And I actually made the argument that whatever we do for our freshmen, we should also be doing for our sophomores, because the freshmen did not have a freshman year. And so I think it is really important to think about what the community building activities are.

Joe: And reflection can be a core part of that, to help students not only reintegrate to school, but recognize how much they've grown in the interim. Here's Allyson.

Allyson: I would push to do some reflecting with kids at the start of the school year. Because they have not had time to process what they've been through. They have not had time to realize their own strengths.



And I think a lot of them have learned some really valuable lessons this year that they'll be able to put into practice this coming year if given the opportunity to do that metacognition.

Kim: We hope these conversations help you further your own process of reflection, thinking about what you've learned, what's changed for you, and what our new and returning students have been through, educationally and emotionally. As you consider what you might do to be responsive and flexible, to restitch a new garment, please consider sharing your ideas with us. We want to know about how you plan to remake learning in the fall semester and beyond.

We're also interested in your thoughts, questions, stories, and ideas for future episodes. You can find the directions for sending us a voice memo in our show notes or on our website.

Joe: Thank you for joining us for this episode of What We Are Learning About Learning. This episode was made possible by many people at CNDLS, including Molly Chehak, Sophie Grabiec James Olsen, Meghan Modafferi, David Ebenbach, Lee Skallerup Bessette, and Eleri Syverson. Big thanks to our guests who shared their insights and observations with us about what students need in the fall. Javier Jimenez Westerman, Erica Cohen-Derr, Jim Wickman, Don Undeen Alice Even, Antonio Gamboa, and Anne Severson. Thanks also to Milo Stout for creating original music for the podcast.

For more information about our podcast series and our guests, check out our show notes where you'll find links to previous episodes, information about how to share your thoughts and ideas with us, our website and blog, and other resources. Again, I'm Joe King.

Kim: And I'm Kim Huisman Lubreski. Thanks for listening.