

Embracing Embodied Learning in Higher Education

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We would like to begin with a quote from bell hooks that represents our hopes for the use of the strategies we have shared. We hope to create a learning community that honors the mind and body to benefit not only students but faculty.

“Learning and talking together, we break the notion that our experience of gaining knowledge is private, individualistic, and competitive. By choosing and fostering dialogue we engage mutually in a learning partnership.” — bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking*

Teacher training and pedagogical norms often center cognitive engagement, ignoring important emotional and physical processes. As we transition back to in-person teaching and learning, there is an imperative to normalize inviting movement and emotions into the classroom to honor where each person is at when they come to the space. As students of feminist scholarship, we introduce ways to turn the classroom into a location of healing and a living, breathing space and to take students and yourselves as whole selves, including minds, bodies, and emotions. These strategies are effective in attracting attention, boosting memory consolidation, and increasing motivation and enthusiasm.

Many of the practices discussed in this resource are derived from Becky Thompson's *Teaching with Tenderness: Toward an Embodied Practice*. Thompson defines tenderness as an “embodied way of being that allows us to listen deeply to each other, to consider perspectives that we might have thought way outside our own worldviews, to practice a patience and attentiveness that allow people to do their best work, to go beyond the given, the expected, the status quo” (Thompson, 2017, p. 1).

To start, we offer questions for self-reflection. While you read through the resource, your answers will help guide your understanding of if and how it is possible to work these suggestions into your classroom. Our identities can affect our ability to incorporate certain practices into our work. Common social identities include race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, and religion. While these and other identities are important to how the following suggestions can be used in your classroom, equally important are identities and contextual factors like field of work, department, class size, classroom setting, and instructor position within the school (e.g., tenured or assistant professor).

Self-Reflection:

What are your most salient social identities?

Are there identities that you have listed that affect your work? Are there social structures and norms around these identities that affect your role as an educator?

What is your position at the University of Iowa?

What department(s) are you a part of?

What classes are you teaching?

What class sizes are you working with?

How do facets of your identity inform your role as an educator?

We all come into life with differing identities that influence our experiences in various communities. These identities shape us both consciously and unconsciously. As educators, it is important to be in tune with the ways differing identities benefit and challenge you. It is also critical to understand how these identities affect your ability to incorporate certain practices in your course and with your students. While continuing with this resource, consider how your own identities affect if and how you work our suggestions into your classrooms. It is also important to consider how these strategies would be useful for yourself.

These strategies are not meant to add stress to your already busy lives but instead to encourage an environment that is welcoming and considerate of mind, body, and emotion.

Preparing for Class

REFLECTION - How do you usually like to prepare yourself for a day of teaching (think of ways you prepare your mind, body, and emotions before class)? What mentality do you bring into the classroom for a successful day?

- Your mood sets the tone of the classroom. Author Sarah Rose Cavanagh delineates this in her book through the concept of **social cohesion and emotional contagion**. Cavanagh provides evidence of emotional contagion manifesting in a classroom—how your own emotions as an instructor can infect your students. Cavanagh quotes teacher and psychologist Haim Ginott, who said, “I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather” (Cavanagh, 2016, p. 48).
- We suggest that you consider doing **contemplative exercises** Becky Thompson finds useful, like mindful breathing and taking a break from last-minute business including answering emails and phone calls before heading to class. In addition, Thompson uses the walk to class as a meditation (Thompson, 2017, p. 57).

Opening the Class

REFLECTION - Are you conscious of the way you open your classes? Try to think back to what you might be doing when opening the class.

- Scan the energy of the room and pay attention to students’ emotions. There are so many social upheavals happening on a day-to-day basis. Take time to have an **open conversation** before jumping into lecture material.
- **“Naming” ritual**. Start the first class by asking each student to say their whole name, the meaning, where it came from, and how they feel about the name. Ask students to repeat the names of all those who went previously (Thompson, 2017, pp. 40–42).
 - This **recognizes each other’s humanity** and helps get grounded in the classroom together, see each person closely, and even shift power in the classroom to be more multilingual and queer-friendly.
- **“Who am I” ritual**. When done at the beginning of class, it helps not only with name recognition but also to settle students and prepare them to begin the class (Thompson, 2017, pp. 43–44).
 - In pairs, each student answers the question for five minutes, while the other practices deep listening without responding (showers their partner with loving kindness).

- As the semester unfolds, the ritual becomes more intimate, more in the present, and less guarded, less rote. The outcome is **seeing each other as three-dimensional feeling beings**.

During the Class

REFLECTION - What kinds of activities do you like to bring into your classrooms? Is your goal simply to cover all the learning objectives through mostly you talking?

- Use **freewriting and theater to help reach deeper emotions** (Thompson, 2017, pp. 12, 51–52, 55, 61).
 - Eodice, Geller, and Lerner in *The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education* demonstrate that students find writing assignments to be most meaningful when they experience it as a “social act” (even when completed on their own) that **creates deep connection with peers and instructors** (Eodice et al., 2017, p. 133).
- Try to go with the flow. If needed, even in the middle of a lecture, do not be afraid to drop everything, including the script you have for the day, and try doing physical activities such as stretching if they feel comfortable, to get students more alert and open (Thompson, 2017, p. 7).
- If permitted, consider holding an outdoor class when it is nice outside. We have noticed that students like being able to get fresh air and get outside of structured buildings during class periods.

Ending the Class

- Becky Thompson likes to do what she calls “**Closing Circles.**” Leave the last five to ten minutes of class to have students share any concerns and thoughts passing the energy around holding hands as appropriate (Thompson, 2017, pp. 48–49).
- The ideal outcome of this would be as Thompson declares: “As a teacher, incorporating the closing circle helps me leave class feeling complete and calm, with a sense of what we accomplished among us” (Thompson, 2017, p. 49).

What About Online/Zoom Class Settings?

- **Use the chat.** Ask students simple questions like how things are going on a scale of 1 to 10 to check in. One way I encountered this as a student is when a professor would display a funny emotional scale meme at the start of each class with music playing in the background to welcome students and to warm up for class.

- Use **breakout rooms** and create an environment where students can complete these rituals in the most organic, casual way possible amongst themselves.
- Behind the cameras are bodies that might need more physical exercise and movement, even more so due to Zoom fatigue. **Encourage everyone to stretch** with you and shake their bodies to clear their minds if they feel comfortable.

What About Large Classrooms Where There Is No Physical Room?

- In a classroom where there is simply no room for extensive physical exercises, encourage students to **do a quick breathing exercise and guided meditation** with you as they are seated.
 - This could be a **five-minute guided meditation** at the beginning or end of class. Invite students to join in the meditation if they would like, ask them to close their eyes so they are not self-conscious, and simply listen to the meditation play (Aboulmagd, 2020). Guided meditations are available through apps like Calm and Insight Timer and can also be found on YouTube.
- Heighten the **mind-body connection through music**. You can make the classroom livelier with upbeat music as you wait for students to arrive.
- Pause for students to manage cognitive load ([drawing a spiral](#), etc.).

What About Teaching a STEM Course or Program?

- Bryan Dewsbury, an assistant professor of biology at the University of Rhode Island, says that he aims to build “**a community of scholars**” with every activity he brings into class (Felten and Lambert, 2020, pp. 81–82).
 - An example ritual you could incorporate is what Dewsbury loves to do to create this **relationship-rich culture** even before the course begins, which is to have students write a “**This I Believe**” **statement** that reflects their purpose for studying biology and their educational and social backgrounds.
 - Based on what you find out about your students both as a group and on an individual level, you could try shifting your pedagogy around their needs.
- It is shown that **using name tents** in high-enrollment biology courses at Arizona State University resulted in an increase in student motivation and learning. Simply have students make name tents however they would like and call each student by name to foster a more personalized environment for embodied learning and teaching (Felten and Lambert, 2020, pp. 87–88).

Self-Reflection:

While answering these questions, keep in mind the reflection you worked through at the beginning of this piece.

What strategy from this resource do you find most promising in your context?

How would it benefit your classroom environment?

What needs to happen, that is in your control, for you to incorporate this into your classroom in the next semester?

Citations

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