

From: [Jonathan Eldridge](#)
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Dear College of Marin Faculty:

We are now just over three weeks away from Commencement, which means we are in the midst of what some call ‘the thousand days of May’—when stress rises, everything is due at once, and it seems like time is speeding by, yet the month will never end. That’s why this week I ask you take a moment you probably can’t spare to read the attached article. Students are also feeling the crunch (which contributes to ours) and feed off how we approach this heightened stress. I’m hopeful the content will both help you with the next few weeks and be of assistance as you consider how to approach Fall Semester—after you have a well-deserved break!

Also this week, as a reminder of the importance and impact of our individual and collective work, I want to invite you to come to our Summer Bridge graduation celebrations (July 6 and July 27, 11a.m., AC 255/courtyard). This year is the 10th Anniversary and we will eclipse 1000 successful participants over that span. Alumni of Summer Bridge are also invited and we will have lunch together while we re-connect with alums and congratulate the newest members of our college community.

Thank you for all you do.

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‘They Need Us to Be Well’

The surprising recipe for building students’ emotional well-being in the classroom? Rest and joy — for professors.

By [Sarah Rose Cavanagh](#)

MAY 2, 2023

The most definitive moment of social-emotional contagion that I have experienced in a classroom was not on a college campus, but at my local gym. I was taking a terrible step aerobics class. The instructor always messed up half the steps. She never seemed to want to be there, and the music was underwhelming. Every time I took the class, I would think longingly of a previous instructor who would holler over the thumping music, collectively whipping us all into a state of sweaty exhilarated exhaustion.

This particular day was no less disappointing than the others — until, halfway through, the owner of the gym entered the room to give some potential clients a tour of the facility. Suddenly the instructor transformed, apparently motivated by the presence of her boss. Her voice ratcheted up a few octaves and her movements became more fluid and pronounced. Instantly I felt my body respond to her greater enthusiasm. You could see the ripple effects spread through the class. We all began engaging more fully in the workout, our sneakered feet slamming a concerted rhythm onto the shiny floor. It was a joy.

The gym owner completed her circuit and left. The instructor deflated back to her usual mediocrity. The rest of us followed suit.

Energy and passion are infectious. Social-emotional contagion in the classroom is a demonstrated phenomenon, one that I’ve [explored in my work](#) and been fascinated by [for years](#). It’s variously been called [affective crossover](#), [emotional transmission](#), or [spirals](#) of enthusiasm and engagement. Whichever label you prefer, it indicates a contagious quality to emotions in the classroom. Instructors and students synchronize their positive and negative emotions as well as their degree of engagement in the material.

Emotional contagion in the classroom was possibly the strongest theme some collaborators and I heard during a qualitative interview study (not yet published) of 35 college students across many different institutional types. When we asked about their best and worst learning experiences, student respondents commonly used words like “vibe,” “energy,” and even “synchrony.”

One student reflected that all of the best learning experiences were marked by instructors who conveyed “real passion, not just for the content, but a passion for the students to understand the content ... it just ignites a spark of interest.” Another commented that “it also depends on the teacher’s mood in the morning ... Fridays are a lot happier than Mondays.”

Their emotional experiences during learning mirror *our* emotional experiences during teaching.

So far, most of the research on how professors influence students’ mental health has focused on [intentional interventions](#) — activities explicitly designed to teach students about well-being or to practice

positive psychology in the classroom. What I'm arguing is that our potential influence goes well beyond such explicit activities. In my [new book](#), *Mind Over Monsters: Supporting Youth Mental Health With Compassionate Challenge*, I consult research, talk to students, and interview various experts to make the argument that, as teachers, we may have an unprecedented opportunity to regularly shape and support the well-being and mental health of our students.

The [best evidence we have](#) suggests that well-being consists of a pleasant brew of positive emotions, a sense of meaning and purpose, a general feeling of life satisfaction, and an ability to pursue self-defined goals. All of those elements are at work in a well-run course led by an enthusiastic and committed instructor. A good course generates interest and excitement, joy and pride in learning and succeeding, social connections with peers and instructors, and purpose and competence emerging out of class activities.

This semester I participated in a “fireside chat” with the remarkable teacher and scholar [Eugenia Knight](#), an associate professor at Simmons University, where we both work. She has decades of experience as a clinical social worker and teaches in our social-work department. The topic of the campus chat — uniting my research and Eugenia’s clinical expertise — was how to support both student and faculty mental health. Something she said hasn’t stopped reverberating in my brain since the chat because it perfectly encapsulates what I hope to convey here: “For our students to be well, they need us to be well.”

A joyful (and sustainable) path forward. The trouble is that these are [anxious](#) and [disheartening](#) times for faculty members. Pandemic overwork and new challenges like ChatGPT are just the half of it. Tenure, academic freedom, support for equity and inclusion, and other cornerstones of academic life are also in the crossfire. Add in all of the work that goes into providing student-centered experiences in the classroom, and the effort to better support *their* mental health can end up taking a toll on *ours*. This kind of teaching often means extra time and emotional labor on the part of an [already-burnt-out](#) work force. What to do?

In a 2022 essay, educational developer and writer Karen Ray Costa [turned to the animal kingdom](#) for inspiration. Sure, you could adopt the parasitic model, in which creatures fight for resources, feeding off one another to survive and thrive. But why not try to emulate mutualism, in which creatures act in a symbiotic way that benefits all of them? A solution, Costa argued, was in “sustainable teaching,” or practices that are student-centered but not a huge drain on faculty time and bandwidth.

One such practice, I believe, is to cultivate mutual joy in learning environments — be it a physical or online classroom. Yes, much about the current landscape of higher education (and the broader world in which it operates) does not naturally invoke joy, but we can foster it in sustainable ways. “Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy,” writes Robin Wall Kimmerer in her luminous [best-selling book](#), *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. “I choose joy over despair. Not because I have my head in the sand, but because joy is what the earth gives me daily and I must return the gift.”

Likewise, academics must find ways to inject that spirit into classrooms. Here, then, as the academic year ends, are some ideas for rekindling the joy of teaching this summer.

First, get some rest. Whatever your summer looks like, it will likely be a change of pace from the pressures of the academic year. My first advice is to take advantage of that shift to reclaim rest and engage in rejuvenating activities wherever you can.

As someone who was a full-time faculty member for 12 years before taking a more administrative position, I know well that even those academics with secure positions and nine-month contracts (a rapidly dwindling proportion of the professoriate) do not get summers “off,” and most contingent instructors can’t even dream of such a thing. Summers are often full of extra teaching assignments and child care, not to mention catching up on our writing, reading, and research in our fields.

I don’t pretend it will be easy, but steal every moment you can this summer to [rest](#) and recuperate. By that, I don’t just mean in a hammock or on the couch. Find and pursue activities that bring you peace and balance — be it gardening, cooking, swimming, or the like.

As the sociologist and writer Tressie McMillan Cottom has argued, “[the institution cannot love you](#),” and it does not own you. You will be a better teacher, researcher, and community member if you carve out time this summer to replenish.

Personalize your course policies and syllabi to reflect your values. In a presentation for the [POD Network](#) last November, [Lindsay Masland](#), an associate professor of psychology at Appalachian State University, challenged faculty members to center their teaching around their own pedagogical values. Unsure what your values are? She recommended you ask yourself two questions:

- When someone compliments your teaching, what is it you most hope they’ll say?
- If you’re more of a glass-half-empty sort, what are your teaching pet peeves? When you see a fellow instructor doing something in class that gets stuck in your craw, what is it?

Your answers are good markers of your pedagogical values. Once you’ve identified them, center your teaching choices around them, asking at each step of the way: Is this consistent with my values? Or is it something I can leave on the cutting-room floor since it doesn’t matter much to me?

For instance, perhaps your hoped-for compliment would be that you’re an instructor who gets to know her students on a personal level, and so you cancel class one day in order to have brief one-on-one chats with each of your students on Zoom. Or maybe you get irritated in conference presentations by a lack of interactivity, and thus you structure your synchronous class time to be peppered with short opportunities for activity and discussion. The idea is to structure your course around your values, trimming what is inconsistent so that your teaching is more sustainable.

Create assignments that you get some measure of satisfaction in evaluating. We all fell in love with our disciplines in past moments of discovery and intrigue. Reconnect with what [drew you to the life of the mind](#) in the first place, and center those topics in your plan for the fall semester. Assign readings you want to read. Structure debates around topics you are still grappling with. Where possible, plan field trips or viewing parties to experience new course content along with your students. Most important, create assignments that you would actually enjoy (or at least not resent) grading.

Karolina Fučíková, an associate [professor](#) of biology at Assumption University, assigned her online class a “plant identification” video project that sent her students tromping through the backyards and fields around their homes across the country. Grading these assignments meant she got a visual tour of diverse flora — surely more of a joy for a botanist than grading 35 essay responses to the same canned question.

Build moments of excitement, social interaction, and sustainability into your fall courses — for you and your students. Following the principles of emotional contagion, think of ways you can generate buzz in the classroom and convey your [love of teaching](#) from Day 1. (Find some ideas in this guide on “[How to Teach a Good First Day of Class](#).”) A plethora of teaching-and-learning research in the past few years has underscored the importance of [social engagement](#), [relationships](#), and [inclusion](#) for student motivation and learning, and we know that social engagement is equally important for mental health.

Spend some time this summer thinking about ways to build community, excitement, and stress buffers into your course structure. I love [this example](#) of a sustainable teaching practice from Robert Talbert, a professor of mathematics at Grand Valley State University and [co-author of](#) *Grading for Growth*. Talbert proposes building a semester around 12 weeks of content instead of the usual 15. Save a week at the beginning of the semester for “onboarding” (early practice with the course material) and community-building ([activities](#)) to help you and the students get to know one another). Reserve the last two weeks for taking stock of what has been learned over the semester, for grading, and for allowing students time to catch up on missed assignments and finish revisions of previous work.

It’s especially critical to set aside catch-up time at semester’s end if you are using [ungrading](#) or other approaches that encourage students to do multiple revisions of their work. In doing so, you are also introducing some mental breathing space for both students and yourself as the instructor.

Create a teaching-and-learning commons. I’ve seen some institutions create a physical space for professors and students to interact, and I hope it’s a growing trend. It might be as simple as a lounge area — near the campus teaching center and student-success office — with comfy furniture, free coffee, and snacks to encourage casual, everyday conversations between students and faculty members. The teaching-and-learning commons could be used for formal and informal gatherings. Faculty members could even be encouraged to hold exam reviews or office hours there.

If your campus doesn’t have the budget or space for a teaching commons (and I know many don’t), consider programming with the same goal. A [recent essay](#) in *The Chronicle* describes how a professor organized a simple book giveaway that had the unintended effect of ameliorating her burnout and sparking conversations between students and faculty members about reading. I’m considering adapting the idea on my own campus in the fall, and organizing a similar exchange for professors and students to swap books over coffee and donuts.

Whether through physical structures or organized events, offer your students and faculty spaces to interact — to talk, laugh, debate, trade books — free of the stress of the classroom context.

Will any of this truly make a difference?

I’ve seen it work. One particularly fraught week during a particularly fraught semester, one of my students stayed after class. She waited patiently while other students asked me questions, cordially gesturing for them to go first. Once it was just the two of us, she took a deep breath: “I was going to wait until our midsemester check-in to say this, but I just have to tell you now. This class is such a source of joy in my life. You’re great, but it’s not just that. It’s the topics, the activities, conversations with other students in class and out of it — just everything we do. It brings me literal joy to come to class every week.”

Naturally, her words filled me with a synchrony of enthusiasm and pleasure. Next academic year let’s embrace defiant, contagious (yet sustainable) joy in the college classroom.

Sarah Rose Cavanagh is senior associate director for teaching and learning at Simmons University, where she also teaches in the psychology department as an associate professor of practice. Her [latest book](#) is *Mind Over Monsters: Supporting Youth Mental Health With Compassionate Challenge*.