

TALON LETTER

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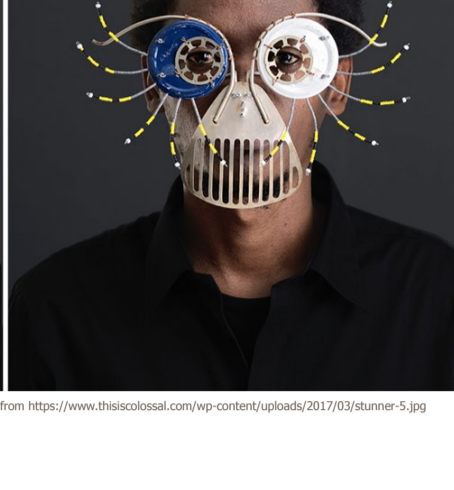
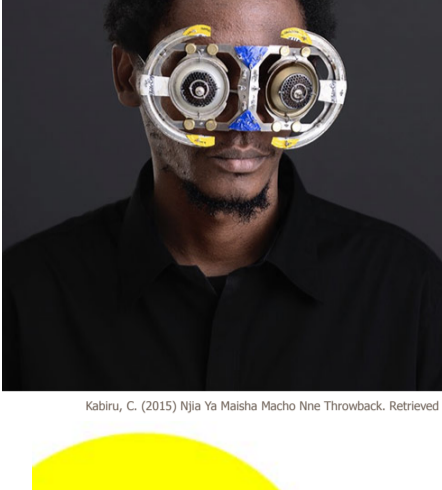
NERDING OUT TO KEEP FROM BURNING OUT

a collaborative letter with Jessamyn Neuhaus

INTRO

A year into pandemic teaching and learning, we all feel the toll it is taking on our minds and bodies alike. Zoom fatigue is real, and planning for and facilitating remote learning can take exponentially longer than in person. Professional and personal life is blurred together as we meet from our home offices, living rooms, and kitchens. It is ever challenging to create boundaries and maintain both wellbeing and productivity, but many of us are also seeing new opportunities in the world of digital education and pursuing innovation in our classrooms. It's these chances to make a difference in innovative pedagogy that seem to be fuelling us through the exhaustion and sparking new excitement in the field. Can getting excited about teaching and embracing your inner nerd get you through the tough stuff?

This issue, we asked self-proclaimed academic nerd, Jessamyn Neuhaus, to explore celebrating positive innovations in pedagogy by nerding out to keep from burning out.



Kabiru, C. (2015) Njia Ya Maisha Macho Nne Throwback. Retrieved from <https://www.thisiscolossal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/stunner-5.jpg>

GUEST EDITOR

Jessamyn Neuhaus

Jessamyn Neuhaus is a professor of U.S. history and popular culture at SUNY Plattsburgh and Interim Director of the Plattsburgh Center for Teaching Excellence. Recipient of the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching, she is the author of *Geeky Pedagogy: A Guide for Intellectuals, Introverts, and Nerds Who Want to be Effective Teachers* (West Virginia University Press). In addition to two historical monographs, Jessamyn has published pedagogical, historical, and cultural studies research in numerous anthologies and journals and regularly gives public presentations and workshops on teaching. She is currently editing an anthology tentatively titled *Picture a Professor: Intersectional Teaching Strategies for Interrupting Bias about Faculty and Increasing Student Learning*, under contract with West Virginia University Press. An advocate for scholarship on teaching and learning that celebrates infinite diversity in infinite combinations, Jessamyn's mission as an educational developer is to help faculty nerd out about teaching and to use their big smart brains for increasing pedagogical self-efficacy.

CONNECT

Visit her website geekypedagogy.com and find her on Twitter [@GeekyPedagogy](https://twitter.com/GeekyPedagogy).

QUESTION

Educators, eggheads, and academic smarty pants: How can you nerd out about teaching and learning to keep from burning out as an educator during the continued crises of our global pandemic era? How can pedagogical learning help us mitigate the discouraging and disempowering aspects of teaching in higher education in the conditions wrought by COVID-19?

Nerding Out to Keep from Burning Out

I'm an academic nerd and maybe you are too. There are a LOT of us teaching in higher education—we bookworms and eggheads who love researching, studying, writing, and pondering the big problems and questions of our fields. In my book *Geeky Pedagogy: A Guide for Intellectuals, Introverts, and Nerds Who Want to Be Effective Teachers* (West Virginia University Press), I argue that these qualities can sometimes impede certain aspects of effective teaching and learning such as clear communication and building trust and approachability. But they can also be our most important source of inspiration and energy for effective teaching because our geeky passions can fuel our course design, classroom activities, and student interactions in vital ways. Moreover, all the skills that make us effective scholars can be applied to learning and relearning—from our very first class to our last—how to teach our students effectively. We can cultivate knowledge about teaching by drawing on research about learning, reflecting on and thinking about our own experiences, trying out new methods and techniques, assessing their efficacy, and trying again. In our individual teaching contexts (which are, important to note, shaped by system inequities baked into higher education such as racism, sexism, ableism, and so on, along with exploitative adjunct and contingent employment practices) we can use our highly trained, superpowered brains to build a teaching toolkit that works for us and for our students.

In short, I urge my readers to nerd out about teaching and learning! In this TALON letter, I encourage you to use this same approach to help mitigate the exhaustion and threat of burnout that so many instructors are facing after more than a year of struggling to meet the challenges of continuing to teach effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic. Without downplaying the very real and unprecedented pain and loss of this time for everyone, I believe that pedagogical learning can help us as educators wrest some meaning from this terrible time and maybe, just maybe, keep teaching burnout at bay.

WHAT DO WE MEAN



1. Visit [this page on my website](#) for a variety of resources about online teaching and learning.

2. My thinking about teaching burnout has been shaped by the work of Rebecca Pope-Ruark, who is writing a book on the topic. For an overview and some practical advice, see her April 2020 Inside Higher Ed article "[Beating Pandemic Burnout](#):"

3. My most important learning about online teaching this past year has come from reading the work of Flower Darby, author of *Small Teaching Online: Applying Research in Online Classes* (Jossey-Bass) and my Twitter pal. She is a regular contributor to The Chronicle of Higher Education and this recent piece, "[7 Dos and Don'ts for Post-Pandemic Teaching with Technology](#)," is a must read.

TOP 3 RESOURCES

"The best thing for being sad," replied Merlin beginning to puff and blow, "is to learn something. That's the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then—to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the only thing for you. Look what a lot of things there are to learn." - T.H. White, The Once and Future King

We are not what we know but what we are willing to learn. - Mary Catherine Bateson

In 2019, I published a book about teaching and learning in higher education titled *Geeky Pedagogy*. After twenty years in the college classroom, I wanted to share what I'd learned from my own teaching experiences and from engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Specifically, I wanted the book to speak to other academic geeks, scholarly nerds, and introverts like myself and like so many others in higher education. In my book, I argue that the qualities that make many people successful scholars do not necessarily lend themselves to effective teaching but that our passion for our subjects can be an important source of inspiration and energy for effective teaching practices, fuelling our course design, classroom activities, and student interactions in vital ways.

After well over a year now of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, I'm even more convinced that nerding out about teaching and learning—embracing the process of pedagogical learning—is a practice that can empower and inspire academic nerds and scholarly geeks facing the very real threat of burnout. Again and again, since March 2020, I've been reminded of Merlin's advice in *The Once and Future King*, that is, when we face the worst sadness, illness, and evil, there is one thing we can do that we'll never regret and that nobody/nothing can take away from us: we can learn something.

One of the main reasons I haven't succumbed to despair this year and given up on ever reaching and teaching students who are burdened with the economic, personal, and social losses and cognitive overload of the pandemic, is that I have learned so much since March 2020 about teaching. In particular, I know so much more about how to utilize my university's learning management system for inclusive learning assessments and also how to design effective online learning activities. I have added numerous new tools to my teaching tool kit, most of which I'll continue using post-pandemic and indeed, for the rest of my career. For an egghead like myself, who is inspired and empowered by approaching teaching as an intellectual project—expanding my skillset by learning, applying what I've learned, reflecting on the impact of those practices, and revising as needed—this has been a life-giving oasis in an unrewarding, discouraging, enervating, and disheartening desert of a teaching time. Pedagogical learning is the rock I'm clinging to in this seemingly never-ending higher ed hurricane. It's a tiny, slippery, sometimes lonely rock, but damn it, it's keeping me from drowning.

To be clear, I wish with all my heart that I had added to my teaching tool kit and increased my pedagogical learning by leaps and bounds in some other totally different context. I would never claim that there is any kind of "silver lining" to the disruption and devastation wrought by the coronavirus. Nor would I ignore the fact that nobody is teaching in a vacuum and thus cultural, institutional and systemic inequities, mismanagement, and leadership failures all impact how we might as individuals implement certain teaching strategies during this crisis. But I know from my own experience and from working with faculty as the Interim Director of the SUNY Plattsburgh Center for Teaching Excellence, that pedagogical learning can be a lifeline right now. By adding another frame to viewing and understanding our current moment—nerding out about what we're learning how to do better as educators—we add some meaning and value to this current terrible moment. It doesn't fix the problems we're facing, and it doesn't erase the losses or the pain. But it can mitigate teaching burnout by helping us recognize the new tools we've gained by teaching in the pandemic era. When we approach our teaching in this utterly uncharted era through the lens of our own learning, we feed our hungry brains and fight the burnout that looms large right now. It is empowering and energizing to remember that as educators, our value and ability should be measured not by "what we know but what we are willing to learn."

FURTHER

Watch as Jessamyn discusses how can you nerd out about teaching and learning to keep from burning out as an educator during the continued crises of our global pandemic era.

"Burnout! A Chat With Rebecca Pope-Ruark by TAPP 91"

Pedagogies of Care: Open Resources for Student-Centered and Adaptive Strategies in the New Higher Ed Landscapes from the Contributing Authors of the West Virginia Press Teaching & Learning Series, June 2020

Recommended Reading and Listening (books, journals and podcasts about teaching and learning in higher education)

THANK YOU

NEXT ISSUE

Summer Update

TERMS OF USE

The TALON team operates under the umbrella of the University of Calgary through an independent research project funded through RPI. Resources shared and recommendations made are based on the team's findings and incorporate University guidance to the best possible knowledge.

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