

# NCTL Newsletter - Spring '24, No. 2

From the Jane B. Nord Center for Teaching + Learning

## Midsemester Reflections



In conversations with people here at CIA and other institutions, I hear a lot of questions that help me understand what topics might be of interest for learning and discussion. This semester's curious questions have included "why are my students finishing work but not turning it in?" "Why do my students struggle so much with starting a project that should be fun?" "If AI can do everything, what's the purpose of college?" and "Why do I have to take out the recycling every night even if the bin isn't full?" (*That last one isn't so much a curious question, but one I get to hear often from my kids.*)

These questions have driven me to explore topics of **self-efficacy**, **motivation**, **perfectionism**, and wonder how these are tied to **grading practices** and **assignment design**. This newsletter includes resources, programming, and thoughts on those topics. If you want a quick read that touches on all of these issues, I recommend the recent teaching newsletter from the Chronicle: [How to help students learn from setbacks](#).

## Motivation and Self-Determination



One of the shared readings of this academic year is [Mind over monsters: Supporting youth mental health with compassionate challenge](#) (Cavanaugh, 2023). When I first started reading this book, I assumed it would help me expand my skills and knowledge about mental health topics. While it has, I have been surprised at how much the book has helped me understand why so many of the educational theories and pedagogical choices I gravitate towards align with positive mental health outcomes AND deep learning.

In one example of connecting theory to positive mental health and learning, Cavanaugh explores [self-determination theory](#) to explain factors behind student motivation and energy. "To support youth mental health," Cavanaugh explains, "we need to create learning environments that are motivating, that summon both energy and the determination to succeed." (119). She explains how motivation and anxiety are closely linked in cognitive and biological function, and we can help students shift from "[I am facing threat, and unable to cope,](#)" (anxiety) to "[I am facing challenge, but I have the resources to cope](#)" (motivation). As a result from studies of intrinsic motivation, self-determination theory provides a pathway for how to encourage students to engage in work based more on their own interests and values rather than a desire for praise and good grades.

Still, grading is unavoidable, and an important part of how we communicate value and success to our students. I recommend reading the section, **I am competent: The challenge of grading and being graded** (found under chapter six for both print and online versions, pp. 146-159 in the print book). Here, Cavanaugh offers poignant thoughts and questions of challenge, equity, and motivation, including:

- "How can we be sure that the intellectual challenge is not by design set up to fail students who don't come to college with a very specific background and preparation?" (158)
- "If, motivated by compassion, an instructor or leader adopts a too passive, permissive stance, they actually risk reducing the students' sense of competence and thus their motivation." (159)

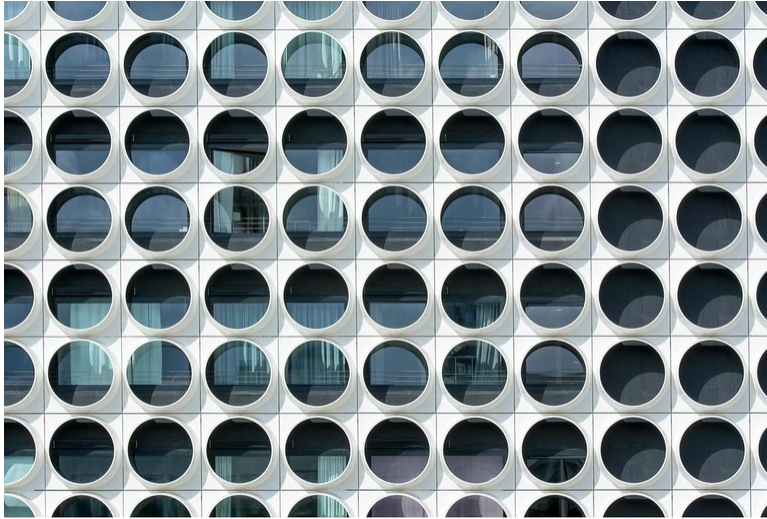
### **Related Programming**

We will hold a special session to discuss the chapters on motivation and grading on [Thursday, May 2, 11 AM - 12 PM](#). [Please register here](#). You do not need to have read the entire book to join in this discussion.

Cavanaugh has a free lesson, [Applying the Science of Motivation to Teaching](#). The lesson takes around 20 minutes to complete, and includes a primer on motivation science relevant to the classroom as well as practical ideas.

- This lesson is part of [OneHE's free courses and resources](#) that are created by a range of outstanding scholars and practitioners. Some other standouts include a course on [The Role of Structure in Inclusive Teaching](#), and video discussions on [Teaching in the Age of AI](#) and [Addressing Destructive Behavior in the Classroom](#).

## Perfectionism and Assignment Design



Keeping up with our areas of expertise can be a challenge. I have been trying a practice of holding time on my calendar every semester for a general review of new research from my favorite resources and an exploration of additional sources. This semester, I discovered a resource that is new to me - [Prompt: a Journal of Academic Writing Assignments](#).

This open-access journal publishes innovative writing assignments from all academic disciplines. The articles describe the purpose and function of the assignments and share assignment materials for easy adoption or adaptation. Some articles of interest:

- [Scaffolding toward self-efficacy](#) (Hoermann-Elliott & Williams, 2023). This article focuses on [self efficacy](#), one's belief in their capacity to succeed at specific tasks or in specific situations (Bandura, 1997), and creating assignments that align with "the needs of underrepresented students seeking careers in nonacademic fields."
- [A cabinet of curiosities, a dwelling place: weekly writing on instagram as multimodal praxis](#) (Conklin, 2021). The author describes their process of reimagining a weekly writing practice using social media to spur invention and increase self-awareness.
- [The writing process photo essay](#), (Ching, 2021). This article focuses on helping students attend to the material and embodied aspects of writing through documenting and describing the writing process.

## Additional Programming and Resources



This semester, we continue the popular offering of **Sharing Practices**, an informal session where 1-2 faculty share information on their current practices. These sessions are meant to spark discussion, encourage creative thinking about teaching, and offer support to one another. Lunch is provided. *Please note that these sessions are limited to faculty or staff with a teaching appointment.*

- Our next session is on **Tuesday, April 9**, 11-12. Rachel Ferber (foundations) talks about [Play as Method](#). Rachel will give a short presentation on this practice, sharing flexible formulas and recipes for experiential learning through collaborative play in the classroom.
- [Register here](#). If you are interested in leading a future sharing sessions practice, please email [keweaver@cia.edu](mailto:keweaver@cia.edu).

**Summer Grading Conference** (online), **June 13-15**. This opportunity brings faculty together to learn about grading practices that best support student learning; promote diversity, equity and inclusion in the classroom; and enhance student and faculty classroom experiences. Now in its fifth year, the purpose of the conference is to support instructors as they strive to challenge traditional grading practices that have been shown to be damaging to students and their learning.

- **Registration** is \$50. If you are interested in attending and sharing your findings at a future session here at CIA (open to all faculty or within your department/area), the Nord Center would be happy to sponsor this fee.



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