

# A season of learning: curiosity in crisis

BY DEBBIE CREAMER

*A poster on my wall says “Blessed are the curious, for they will have adventures.” A companion these days might be the quote sometimes credited to Winston Churchill, “Never let a good crisis go to waste.” How might we lean into our curiosity and foster institutional learning during these times of crisis?*



It's hard to believe it's *already* been a year; it's hard to believe it's *only* been a year; it's hard to believe *how much* has happened this year; it's hard to believe *how much didn't* happen this year. I imagine these will be familiar refrains in the coming months as many of us approach the one year anniversary of the last time we flew on a plane, attended a professional conference, taught in a classroom, worked in our office, offered a handshake, sat next to a student to eat, or experienced other aspects of the “before-times” or “life as normal.” Some of us may experience a less distinct sense of anniversary, either because life has largely returned to or remained somewhat like “normal,” or because our institutions and our people were already experiencing crises or chaos long before the global health pandemic hit. And yet others might feel nostalgic for a time when institutional life seemed more predictable and within our control (or, at least, when we faced unsurprising and familiar challenges), perhaps remembering the meeting or moment when long-term plans were replaced by short-term (or one day at a time) strategies, and where our focus shifted to institutional and interpersonal risk, day-to-day variation and uncertainty, and all hands on deck.

In any of these cases, an anniversary (or, series of anniversaries) can make for a helpful occasion for reflection

and curiosity, especially as it allows us to notice that somewhere along the way we have shifted (or, perhaps, still need to shift) from sprint to marathon, from the adrenaline of pivoting to the intentionality of planning, from doing “good enough” to doing well. We can look back and learn from what we've done, even as we also keep looking forward.

In last month's *Colloquy Online*, ATS Executive Director Frank Yamada announced the creation of an Educational Design Lab (EDL) at The Association of Theological Schools (ATS). One the EDL's initial goals was to rethink and redesign the education and programming resources that ATS offers to support schools and leaders in schools, not just in light of the pandemic and the inability to travel but in broader support of the ATS mission; as he writes, “the EDL is leading not just a programmatic pivot but a cultural shift in the Association's education and engagement strategy toward becoming a hybrid learning organization where we learn from, for, and with the membership.” As the director of the EDL, I have enjoyed thinking about how the ATS EDL might also serve as a model or inspiration for similar projects at member schools, or how our own work might more directly support you.

But this prompts the question: what even is an educational design lab? The first two words in the title might be self-explanatory: “educational,” because this is both the content and process of our work, and “design” as we draw on strategies related to design thinking, UX and user-centered design, and universal design for learning. The third word, “lab,” is perhaps the most important—not because it describes *where* we work (we don’t actually have benches, beakers, and goggles!) but *how* we work. A lab-centered approach highlights the importance of exploration (the answers aren’t yet known), curiosity (we want to learn more), and creativity (we’re trying new things rather than only following established patterns). A lab-centered approach is also more than a mindset; it involves concrete embodied practices. For example, when we are “in the lab,” we actually run experiments—we build and create things, then review and evaluate and learn from them, and then build on that learning as we approach our next creation.

We start with hopes and hypotheses, mapping the possibilities and constraints related to the experiences and outcomes we desire, rather than doing something just because “we’ve always done it this way” or even because “it should be done this way.” We wrap up any experiment with an intentional time of review and iteration, where we seek multiple perspectives and explore together what went well, what surprised us, and what we might do differently next time. We rely heavily on sprints (short bursts of brainstorming or problem-solving conversations, with an actual timer) and prototypes (building something quickly so we can get feedback from potential users rather than spending too much time “just talking”). Drawing on insights from universal design (and from my own work on disability theology), we recognize that limits are normal and ever-present, and that constraints can create space for creativity, interdependence, and innovation. We value and actively seek diverse perspectives and cautious/critical voices, and we strive to embody a consistent ethos of learning, humility, and playfulness.

*A lab-centered approach highlights the importance of exploration, curiosity, and creativity.*

I think methods or approaches like this can be helpful in any institutional context and in any season of an institution’s life, but they can be especially valuable during times of crisis. For me, and perhaps for you, this year has unavoidably been a time of experimentation and iteration (try, fail, try again). We’ve all done sprints and built prototypes, not necessarily because we wanted to but because we had to do something, and because we couldn’t just rely on what we’ve done before. In the midst of newness and uncertainty, one option is to just patch things up and keep going. Another option—bringing a lab mentality to these pivots and emergent practices—enables us to learn from these experiences in ways that prepare us for our next steps, and nudges us to find a little extra meaning and even joy in this work. Like a good field education program, it allows us not only to take on certain practices, but to spend time intentionally learning from and in the midst of those practices.

Because a lab-centered approach is also about making things concrete (looking at practices, not just talking

about ideas), let me offer a specific example related to online and hybrid learning. This past spring, and throughout the year, I watched schools (and churches and workplaces) quickly pivot from onsite engagement to emergency remote delivery. For some, this was a dramatic shift, from an entirely campus-based experience one week to a fully physically distanced model the next. For others, the shift was less extreme, either because they kept some onsite engagement or because they were already engaged in distance learning and teaching—but even in these cases, most of us experienced some sort of unanticipated (and, in many cases, unwanted) pivot to our work, our routines, or our relationships. In the initial stages, many of us were just doing what needed to be done—one emergency decision at a time, building the bridge as we walked across it—with no time or energy to ask anything other than just “what could possibly be next?” or “when will things return to normal?” And yes, there are definitely times when just staying afloat is all

we can expect, and when it is enough! But, if we're able to bring in our curiosity and something like a lab-centered approach, we have a better chance of learning from these experiences, and perhaps adding some joy as well.

One easy first step is simply to replace a period with a question, "what might we learn from this?"—and, not just to solve a problem, but to imagine new connections or new opportunities. So, for example, we can receive feedback like "two-hour Zoom lectures are exhausting" and not only try to fix the problem (break the lectures into smaller chunks, add more active learning opportunities) but also ask "hmm, I wonder how effective two-hour lectures are for my onsite students?" We might decide that online learning isn't ideal for our degree programs, but still use this experiment of remote instruction to imagine how these tools could help us connect with students who are away on internship. We might observe how much we miss the hallway or cafeteria or chapel or dorm as part of learning and formation, and then bring our curiosity to the experiences of students who didn't have those experiences even in "normal times" because of their work or family commitments. We might recognize that even our onsite teaching is a "hybrid" experience (students do as

much of their learning in the library, the coffee shop, or at home as they do in a classroom), and then wonder about different practices for hybridity. We might even notice that binary categories, like synchronous and asynchronous, are not as tidy as they seem [[watch my video](#) for a few thoughts on semi-synchronous engagement] and are just as relevant on site as online. And so on.

A lab-centered mentality—coupled with attention to education and design—leads us to new adventures, allows us to go deeper into our experiences, helps to develop a sense of learning community, and can bring a sense of agency and fun to our work. It helps us to not only imagine but also to build new futures while staying open and attentive to our present moment. And it reminds us to play. I encourage you to try some of these practices in your own communities, or name and celebrate the places where these practices are already happening. At the same time, I write all this recognizing that we are still in the midst of the pandemic and other significant crises and stresses, and so I hope you will also be able to balance curiosity and care, learning and resting, persistence and permission. And don't forget your safety goggles.



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