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"Best Practices" Aren't Always Best

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For the last fifteen years or so, I've done freelance editing work as a side gig. This winter break, while moping around with a mysterious months-long lung infection (not COVID... probably?), I edited a colleague's book manuscript, which focused, in part, on neoliberalism (a slippery and contested term) and the deployment of certain reductive conceptions of religion in various development contexts around the world. It was a super interesting read, but that's not what I want to focus on here. Instead, I want to take inspiration from her critique of various neoliberal terms/concepts and consider one particularly prevalent in higher education—that of "best practices." This is a phrase we use all the time, especially related to online teaching and learning. I think we have good reason to be suspicious of this idea.

Examples of "best practices" abound, even at Wabash. Take the list below, from a *Stanford's Tomorrow's Professor* post, which summarizes a chapter from the older version of *The Online Teaching Survival Guide: Simple and Practical Pedagogical Tips* (2010):

- Best practice 1: Be present at the course site.
- Best practice 2: Create a supportive online course community.
- Best practice 3: Develop a set of explicit expectations for your learners and yourself as to

how you will communicate and how much time students should be working on the course each week.

- Best practice 4: Use a variety of large group, small group, and individual work experiences.
- Best practice 5: Use synchronous and asynchronous activities.
- Best practice 6: Ask for informal feedback early in the term.
- Best practice 7: Prepare discussion posts that invite responses, questions, discussions, and reflections.
- Best practice 8: Search out and use content resources that are available in digital format if possible.
- Best practice 9: Combine core concept learning with customized and personalized learning.
- Best practice 10: Plan a good closing and wrap activity for the course.

Upon first read, who could argue with these? Create a supportive course community? That's my jam! Develop a set of explicit expectations? I love transparency! It's not that the practices on these "best" lists are bad ideas, per se. It's not that I'm opposed to asking for informal feedback or planning a good wrap activity or [fill in the blank]. It's that such "best practices" are often presented as generic, broadly applicable, value neutral, consensus based, and informed by research, when they aren't always or necessarily. (See Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demons* [2017] for an in-depth critical consideration of this concept.) It may not be clear how to operationalize them in any given context; it may not be possible to do so. Some could even be detrimental if operationalized in certain ways by certain instructors for certain students. Best practices are ostensibly good for everyone, when, in fact, they may be good for no one. (This reminds me of the point of *The End of Average* (2016), when Todd Rose shows that an "average" person doesn't exist, so when we design for an average person, we are actually designing for nobody.)

Worse, in my mind, is that there can feel like no good way to dispute or critique "best practices." Especially when written in the imperative, like those above, they don't exactly invite reflection, conversation, inquiry, experimentation, or collaboration. When we start throwing around the phrase "best practices," particularly those of us in positions to influence other instructors and what goes on in the college classroom, I worry we start to become "part of a machinery suppressing" faculty. After all, these are the "best" teaching practices. Everyone agrees. Who agrees? Well, the teaching "experts": instructional designers, staff at centers for teaching excellence, faculty who have won teaching awards, those who publish on this topic. And who has time to question *them*, especially when everyone is just trying to stay on top of teaching and research and service (amid an ongoing pandemic, nonetheless!)? Trying to also stay on top of literature related to teaching may simply feel like too much.

Our teaching contexts are incredibly distinct and diverse. There are so many "situational factors" for us to consider as we design and implement our courses, especially right now. I can't be sure that what works (some days, ha!) for my Religions of the World course will work for a colleague in my department teaching another section of this very same class during the

very same semester. Okay, so creating community seems like a good idea, particularly online, but how I go about doing that this semester over Zoom in my upper-level Religion and Film class will (and should, I think) be very different than how a friend does it in his upper-level U.S. Judiciary Zoom class, even though we are in the same college and have rather similar teaching philosophies. Best practices are somehow specifically evidence-based, but also somehow broad enough to make room for every possible instructional context. That just can't be.

I am fully in support of learning from one another. I am fully in support of sharing and spreading what is known (and some things are known) about teaching and learning. I am fully in support of experimentation and growth, especially in one's own classroom. I am fully in support of professional development initiatives that encourage faculty to consider what they're doing in their instruction and—this is the most important—*why*. I am not convinced that notions of "best practice" necessarily promote any of this. It makes me nervous when anyone starts implying or advising that there is a set, static list (like a top ten) of teaching strategies that will work for everyone, regardless of context, and that if we would all just follow these practices, we would be set. I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but teaching just doesn't work that way.

https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2021/02/best-practices-arent-always-best/