

## **“Small is All”: Emergent Strategy for Teaching and Learning** by Daisy L. Breneman and Kristen Kelley

*“Small is good, small is all.”*

–adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy* (41)

It’s very easy to get overwhelmed by, well, just about everything right now. By the enormity and the sheer volume of the tasks we face. Because we’re [struggling](#), exhausted, and pulled in so many directions. Because of the many sources of conflict, division, and seeming chaos around us. It’s *a lot*.

But, as author adrienne maree brown reminds us, “small is all.” The small changes we make, the small interactions we have each day, can ripple out and have major impacts in the world around us.

In Fall 2023, a [CFI reading group](#) gathered to read and talk about [Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Shaping Worlds](#) (2017). Past reading groups have also [yielded meaningful insights](#) we can apply to our faculty lives and beyond. As brown notes, “When more people imagine together, and then step from imagining into thinking through the structures and protocols of a society together, then more needs are attended to. Responding to common text is a great way to do this” (249).

Our group is still engaged in the process of moving from imagining to applying emergent strategy to our various contexts. Briefly, brown defines emergent strategy as “strategy for building complex patterns and systems of change through relatively small interactions” (2). Which, really, is what teaching seeks to do: through the relatively small interactions in our classrooms (or, whatever spaces in which we might teach—and whatever our primary roles on campus or beyond), we seek to create transformation.

While brown offers many guiding principles and practices, we have identified just a few examples of ways we might apply emergent strategy to our many contexts of teaching and learning:

- Small changes/actions matter, and ripple outward
  - Small strategies can make big differences, as Emily Gravett explores in her recent [Think-Pair-Share Toolbox](#). Whether in the initial design of new classes, or [revising existing courses](#), small is all.
  - It’s the small interactions we have with students and each other that can matter most. [Checking in](#) with students at the beginning of class. (As Elmo recently showed us, [check-ins matter!](#)) Talking to colleagues in the hallway. Asking someone how we can support them. We can’t control every environment or interaction, but in the ones we can shape, work to inject small moments of kindness and [care](#).

- Centering relationships
  - brown suggests that “perhaps humans’ core function is love” (9). Love is indeed a powerful force in our lives, and [in our teaching](#). We can prioritize students, and ourselves, as humans first. We can remind students they are [more, and more important than, their work](#). We can do the same [for each other](#).
  - While we won’t always love (or anything close to it) those in our immediate surroundings, we can nurture and [cultivate positive relationships](#), including in our teaching. Learn more from Kyle Gipson’s toolbox on [Relationship-Rich Education](#).
- Decentralizing power structures
  - Decentralization, or “the dispersion of distribution of functions or powers, the delegation of power,” is an important element of emergent strategy (83). We can design our classrooms so that learners participate in the decision-making processes, through surveys, class discussions, or other deliberative processes.
  - Yes, there are things that we as the content experts want to shape, and we do need to balance [flexibility and structure](#). But learners can benefit from [individual and collaborative choice](#). Flexibility and adaptation are also key elements of [universal design](#).
- Following nature
  - Throughout the book, brown offers many ways that we can apply lessons from nature to our classrooms and our daily interactions. For example, the [ways starlings flock](#) can teach us about collective leadership, partnership, and adaptability (46). In the classroom, we can create opportunities for students to pursue independent projects and pathways, while also working as a “flock” in the learning community.
  - To learn more, consider attending this [WGSS event](#) on Thursday, April 4, at 4 pm: “Ecofeminism: Better Living Through Biomimicry with Alison Bodkin and Kristen Kelley” (Arboretum Pavilion).
- Addressing conflict in the classroom
  - Though many of us feel uncomfortable with conflict, brown writes that “conflict is an invitation to deepen, to learn more about each other” (258).
  - Embrace conflict, even as it feels challenging. Particularly in the current moment, where division abounds, we can work across differences to better understand each other and ourselves. [Difficult moments](#) are opportunities to learn.
- Saying “no”
  - “No” also creates space for your “yes” (236). As faculty, we owe it to ourselves and our students [to make room for our yeses](#) (which requires us to sometimes say no!).
  - We often clutter our classes: so many readings, so many lectures, so many learning activities. We rush through, desperate to cover content. But [slowing down](#) can benefit us and our students, gives us space for deeper and more authentic learning, and relationship building.
  - We can offer students models [for saying “no,”](#) including by giving them power (for example, to opt out or choose alternative versions of assignments; to choose from multiple questions on exams; or to choose the format of projects).

- “Never a failure, always a lesson” (42)
  - We’re conditioned to document and celebrate our successes, but let’s make space for failure and the multitudes of lessons we can learn from it.
  - We’re also conditioned to be right, but Brown urges us to be wrong, or “just at least consider that the place where you are wrong might be the most fertile ground for connecting with and receiving others” (94). We can remind our students that we are learning together and that we are fallible. We can enter all spaces with [humility](#).
  - CFI Executive Director Gilpatrick Hornsby offers a powerful example in his “ramen story” (and we all have them) in his recent Toolbox on [Equity Minded Teaching](#).
- “Feeling is an important and legitimate way of knowing” (38)
  - While we of course attend to the intellectual lives of our students, they are whole people, and we are whole people too. In [The Spark of Learning: Energizing the College Classroom with the Science of Emotion \(2016\)](#), Sara Rose Cavanagh explores ways to use what we know about emotion to increase learning. The [affective dimensions](#) of learning matter; [embodied learning](#) matters.
- “This is all the miracle (adapting toward pleasure)” (73)
  - Teaching is a miracle, and it can be really joyful. Teaching allows us to [cultivate curiosity](#), to [be playful](#), to teach [like a punk](#) or [a pup](#)!
  - No, we will not always be happy. But we can cultivate pleasure and joy. There is [pleasure in teaching, especially inclusive teaching](#). Yes, it is hard. Really hard, sometimes. Just remember, the messiest, most stressful, most grief-filled moments are the miracle!

These are just a few ways, of so many, to engage with emergent strategy. We’d love to keep these conversations going! Please join our [Diversity Conference Session](#) on “Boldly Embracing Emergent Strategy to Shape Change” on Wednesday, March 20 from 10:30-11:45 a.m. We hope to connect with you there, but also feel free to email any one of us to explore ways to apply emergent strategy to teaching and learning.

*Note: while just two co-authors are listed, insights were gained through conversation and collaboration by the entire group, and the conversations continue!*

*Daisy L. Breneman holds a joint appointment with University Advising and Justice Studies and is the co-coordinator of the Disability Studies Minor. She is also a CFI senior faculty associate. She can be reached at [brenemdl@jmu.edu](mailto:brenemdl@jmu.edu).*

*Kristen Kelley coordinates Multilingual Student Services and teaches in the Women’s, Gender, and Sexualities program. She led the organization of the fall 2023 Queer Teach-in, which featured a keynote conversation with adrienne maree brown and two students. She is a co-coordinator of the Queer Studies Minor, with enrollment beginning fall 2024. Reach Kristen at [kelle8km@jmu.edu](mailto:kelle8km@jmu.edu).*