

Designed for Learning Ep20 Transcript

Hinda Mandell on ... Crocheting in the Classroom? (October 1, 2026)

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[JIM LANG]

(cheerful upbeat music)

Welcome to *Designed for Learning*, a podcast from Notre Dame Learning. I'm your host, Jim Lang.

The artifacts of student learning used to come in the form of printed essays and exams. Then we moved everything online, and students were largely turning their papers or essays or exams in through the course LMS. We gained a lot there in terms of efficiency, and we also reduced the amount of paper that was being shuffled back and forth between teacher and students. With the presence of AI ever increasing on college campuses, though, a newfound interest has been developing around acts of making in higher education. For example, faculty members are asking students to keep handwritten course journals or create physical writing portfolios. Today's guest takes a fascinating approach to the art of making in her courses, asking students in her general education course to learn to crochet. Why she does this, how it relates to student learning, and what the rest of us can learn from it are the questions we will take up on today's episode of *Designed for Learning*.

Hinda Mandell is a professor in the School of Communication at RIT, where she was the director of the university's journalism program from 2020 to 2024. She's passionate about prioritizing a DIY, materials-based approach, including hand-stitching, hand work, and zine production as a thought tool in the university classroom. She's been interviewed by *The New York Times* and The Associated Press, among other global outlets, on the importance of making objects by hand. She's the author of several books exploring how people use handcrafts as a tool for activism and dissent.

Welcome to *Designed for Learning*, Hinda.

[HINDA MANDELL]

Hey there, good morning. I am very happy to be here and talk about this.

[JIM LANG]

All right, so I have to start by telling you that normally, I have some scripted questions for my guests, just get us started. In this case, I just have one big question, then a bunch of follow-up questions depending upon how you respond. And the big question's sort of obvious here. So why on earth are you having students crochet in class? (laughs) And before you answer that big question, though, just tell me a little bit about the class itself that you're having students do this work in. How big is the class? Why are students taking it? How does it fit in the curriculum? All that kind of stuff. So give me some context for this course.

[HINDA MANDELL]

Yeah, absolutely. First off, I should say that if you see me looking down, I'm actually crocheting right now a little bit. (both laugh) It helps keep me focused and calms my nerves. The class in which I required students to learn crochet—and when I say required, I mean that it was part of their course grade—this was in the spring of 2026. And so I think it was around 15% of their course grade was their participation and turning in artifacts, meaning crocheted objects. So they had to do this. If they didn't do it, they could still reasonably pass the class, but if they really wanted to strive for a B-plus, A-minus, or A, they had to participate in this.

So the class is called Persuasion. It's part of the general education course system at RIT. This particular class had 60—six-zero—students in it, and there were no prerequisites. It is open to all majors. So we have a lot of STEM majors and a lot of art and design majors in that class, perhaps a fewer number of liberal arts majors. And it really looked at the art of rhetoric and argument from a theory-based perspective. So how do you persuade people? And these students are super interested in the topic because you go online, and online really is all about persuasion. Social media is all about persuasion. Marketing is about persuasion. So they wanted to know, how do I persuade people? And they learned very quickly how difficult persuasion is, which is a little confusing to them because they go online, and they feel like they are being persuaded. So how come they can't be effective persuaders? So that's basically the class.

[JIM LANG]

It seems like you have to start with some persuasion for yourself, like, why you're doing this in the class, right? That's the first big act of persuasion here, it seems like. (laughs)

[HINDA MANDELL]

I mean, you absolutely got it. And that was the case that I tried to make to students. So the premise of the class is we are all inundated, mostly online because that's where we live so much of our lives, with messages. And so how do we interpret these messages, and is it possible for us to create persuasive messages?

But here's the thing. It's really, and I'm going to say this assertively: Very few of us like the amount of time that we spend online. Very few of us like how we feel when we've been spending so much time online, yet of course we are tethered to our phones. We need our phones to do the duo authentication login system or to log in or clock in for work. So we can't be separated from our phones, but they cause this tremendous sense of anxiety and sense of just we're not measuring up.

So in this Persuasion class, I wanted to put forward a pitch to students, and this is where the crochet comes in. I wanted us to be more attentive and intentional with how we spend our attention.

The podcaster Ezra Klein talks a lot about attention as being our most precious and limited resource. And where we put our attention also affects how we feel about ourselves and how we move through the world. So how can we be more healthy with how we spend our attention? So my pitch was, I am going to teach you all to crochet. There were 57 students in the class who never crocheted before, three students who had. I did have a TA who assisted me. So we're going to put our attention on doing something offline that will require 100% of your attention and focus offline in order to learn the structure of crochet. And then in exchange, you all will be selecting a hobby to do. It has to be offline. And so you can also cultivate your own hobby, your interests, whether it's hiking, whether it's volleyball, whether it's cooking, whether it's—some students, actually a few students selected solving timed Rubik's cube puzzles.

It could be anything, but just something that serves some type of beneficial brain floss to you. And I will also give you course credit for that, as well. So it's not just me doing the top down, you must learn to crochet. It's more like thinking about, how can we be healthier, happier people and more thoughtful with how we spend our time?

[JIM LANG]

So this seems like there's actually two ways to possibly think about this in the course. One is it does actually relate to the course content because the course content is about, to a certain extent, being good citizens or being more persuasive online and recogniz[ing] how you're being persuaded online. That's kind of course content related. There's another thing here which is more just about yourself as a learner because you're tying attention essentially to the learning process and development as a formation of a human being with their attention. So how would you divide up your goals with this? Could you envision this in a different kind of class, or is it pretty tied to your subject matter?

[HINDA MANDELL]

I try to bring in very unexpected, hands-on making activities to all of my classes for a few reasons. Number one, I love the challenge, and we think a lot about what's best for students, but I think it's also really important to think about what's best for the instructor. This is my 16th year at my university. I'm proud of that longevity. I feel like in this day and age to stay with an employer for that long, it says something, and I'm grateful, very grateful to have this opportunity. But at the same time, things become rote. The nature of students change. It's been 16 years now, so I don't know how many generations of students that is. And there's nothing worse than feeling bored. At least there's nothing worse for me than feeling bored. And we've had that experience, I guess I'll speak for all educators, of just that energy suck feeling in the classroom where you're like, this is not landing, I don't want to be here, they don't want to be here. What's the point?

And I even hand-stitched a patch that I—we do a lot of hand-stitching in my classes as a way of reflecting and thinking. And so I hand-stitched a patch that keeps me honest, and the patch says: Ask not what is the point, ask what point should I make? And I think this gives a little bit of agency to students and also to instructors. So I like bringing the hands-on as a challenge to stay fresh and also a challenge to learn something new.

Because to go back to the Persuasion class, spring of 2026, on the first day of class, 60 students, I asked the class, how many of you have forgot maybe even most of what you've learned as a student here? And that class was populated mostly by third-, fourth-, and some fifth-year students. So they've been here for, they know what it's like to be a university student. Nearly every single student raised their hand. So it's like, we know that people are forgetting specific content, but what they need to maintain is learning how to learn, learning to stay curious, learning to ask the right questions and to think critically, and also learning to kind of embrace the unexpected. You're going to get things thrown at you.

I'm teaching a class now to mostly STEM and business and design majors. It's a basic communication class where these majors are supposed to learn public speaking, small group communication, and leadership skills in a communication context. And we are doing algorithmic bead-weaving as a module because it's a challenge for me to teach it, and I think it's good for the instructor to be challenged, and it's a challenge for them to learn it, and they can't AI their way through it. They have to figure it out. And I truly believe in life, you just have to figure things out. And sometimes it's so hard to figure things out that we just stop, but if you are required to do this for a grade, you don't really have that luxury.

[JIM LANG]

Yeah. I mean, I just found this awesome. It's fascinating, and I could totally get onboard with all this stuff here, especially the making stuff in class, having physical objects in people's hands, and relating that to learning, that sounds awesome to me. I still feel like if I was the student in that class, I would want you to keep reminding me why, what's the connection of this? What am I getting out of this? I guess my question is, how often are you making that pitch to the students or tying it to specific assignments or discussions about it? How are they processing the work of the crocheting in different ways or that you're talking to them about it?

[HINDA MANDELL]

Yes. So I am trying to make the pitch to them constantly because it is a bizarre connection, persuasion and learning to crochet. So I remind them about the theme of the class. And so the theme of the Persuasion class was it's important where you put your attention. And also there was kind of the wellness theme, too, about learning how to take time and make time for yourself to do your own interests. So one of the ways that I kind of made this case is I brought in an associate provost at my university who, at the time—he just stepped into a sabbatical role—but at the time he was the associate provost for global education at my university—a tremendously huge job because we have global campuses that he's in charge of, and we have priority global partnerships that he's in charge of, and it's an institute-level position.

And he is an absolutely passionate sourdough breadmaker, and he majored in economics. No, excuse me, his Ph.D. is in economics, and he used to work in business, but his truest calling in life is making sourdough bread. And he talks about this on a religious level, and I get it because I talk about hand work on a religious level, too. So I had him come in and share with the class—right, here is a very objectively successful person, he's at the administration level at a very large private university in charge of global partnerships—talking about what role sourdough has in his life and what role it plays in his job. And what he basically said is being able to step aside and take time to work with this passion project, it allows him to be present when it comes to his job because he gets to exercise his brain in kind of a creative technical way in the kitchen, and then he can come in and he can focus.

And he came to speak to my class at a time when there were drone and bomb attacks affecting Dubai. And my university has a global campus called RIT Dubai. And so this was, I believe, in January or February of 2026 with the war that the U.S. and Israel is involved in Iran. And so there were university students whose lives were endangered on that campus. There were university students at RIT Dubai who had to leave campus or if they were American, come back to the U.S. So he was in charge of a very complicated and serious global matter. But doing the sourdough work, and you have to smile when you talk about it, that allowed him to really be effective and present. And so he comes and makes this really persuasive case to the class, using

his persuasive skills to talk about the importance of hands-on work, the human-material relationship, and why that's important really to flourish as a human being.

[JIM LANG]

Yeah, that's great. And I think if there was one great takeaway, I would have a takeaway for someone listening to this podcast. Something you mentioned earlier about challenging ourselves as teachers, and I think that's absolutely right. I taught for 20 years at the same institution, same courses over and over again, and I tried to find different ways to move myself around the university. I took different roles there to keep myself fresh. But challenging myself with bringing some hand-making project in the classroom would've also been a different way to make me rejuvenate my teaching every year. And I think it sounds like you're challenging yourself with different sorts of handcrafts in different kinds of classes. So I think that's really important for us to be aware that it's not just attention to our students, but also attention to ourselves as teachers is going to help us renew higher education.

We both have to be renewing ourselves, the teachers themselves, but then also the students, too. So I hope that's a big takeaway for folks. Challenge yourself by bringing something into class that's unusual, that might throw you off a little bit as part of the process, as well. So when you started doing this stuff, have you been doing this for your whole career or did this enter at some point midway through your career?

[HINDA MANDELL]

Yeah. Okay, great question. So I started doing this with baby steps in 2017. So I think that would've been, it's maybe a little cliché to say this, but I think that would've been right around when I maybe submitted my dossier for tenure consideration.

[JIM LANG]

I think that's pretty common, actually. After you get your tenure, if you get tenure, that's especially when people are looking around and say, okay, I've got 30 more years here. So you get this sense of, I have to do something new. And I think I had the same feelings at that time.

[HINDA MANDELL]

Yeah, it was in a class called Technology-Mediated Communication, which I think just basically means how we interact with each other in the digital age. And it was my first time teaching this class, and I had a personal pet peeve, and that personal pet peeve is the way that we, at a university level, at a society level, equate technology with the digital. And technology is not synonymous with digital works. Technology, if you break it down to its Greek roots, it's like the expression of a skill. Using a pencil on paper is a technology that was created. And so I kind of

got this bee in my bonnet, and then also thinking more about how we just put the digital on a pedestal. Of course, now there's the breaking news about the flip iPhone, which is going to retail from anywhere from \$2,000, like \$3,200. And of course we all need it.

But it's important to give respect and pay homage to the roots of the digital, which is actually textile production and the Jacquard loom, the 19th-century invention, this massive clunky, noisy loom that mechanized textile fabrics so that more middle-class people—I don't know if they had the construct of middle-class people in the 19th century—but the merchant class could afford pretty textile fabrics of maybe butterflies that would be woven together or pretty floral designs, and that these textile fabrics weren't just limited to the elites. And it was the Jacquard loom through a punch-card system that created these fabrics. And so the punch-card system, of course, is what led to modern-day computing. But if you look at even the earliest computer programmers, as we know them, they attribute the Jacquard loom. So innovations in textile design and textile production is what brought us the computer age.

So it's like, all right, so let's think about textile production as a technology, and let's explore the roots of that to the digital age. So just trying to complicate things and bring a little bit more respect to textiles because as someone once said, I don't remember who, but you can't go a day without not touching textiles. We wear clothes, we take showers and use towels, we sleep on sheets. So it's such a part of our lives and so taken for granted. And so let's kind of explore how textile production and the way we interact with textiles really is such a part of the human experience.

[JIM LANG]

So you started this in 2017, just sort of bringing it a little bit as a part of this relationship with technology and the roots of digital technologies, and then started moving it more and more into class in more substantial ways.

[HINDA MANDELL]

Yeah, it wasn't until, I think it was about three or four years ago, I was very glad to be asked to teach a class based on my research called Global Craftivism. So as you mentioned, how people use textile-making as a form of political engagement.

[JIM LANG]

Actually, sorry, one of the most famous obviously is Gandhi with a spinning wheel. And my field is 20th-century British literature, so I would show images of Gandhi with a spinning wheel, and that was a way of trying to reclaim economic independence for Britain using handcrafting of your own clothes and all that kind of stuff. So I know this history is really important, too.

[HINDA MANDELL]

Yeah. I'm sorry, I do not know the history as well as you, but on a very basic level, I do share that information with my class because you see this across culture and across time, the way that people, often marginalized people or people who don't have, historically, a formal right to vote, the way that they express themselves through textiles. And so we did a lot with hand-stitching, where we literally stitch words using the back stitch. So looking at kind of a piece of cloth as a canvas to express oneself. And then starting in, geez, maybe it was that first Persuasion class in 2025 actually, where I required students not to learn crochet, but to learn hand-stitching because hand-stitching is easier to do than crochet. So we started with hand-stitching and then moved it up to crochet in order to challenge myself.

[JIM LANG]

All right. So let's go back to the classroom here, and let's get concrete here. So I'm sure you have some students who resist this. And so what will students—I have really two questions. First of all, resistance, but also are there some students who just can't do it? They have really trouble with this kind of work, and so how do you handle both those things?

[HINDA MANDELL]

Okay, great questions. Resistance. Yes, there are students who resist it. However, perhaps because of the nature of the type of student at my university, I've not yet had someone outright say, "I will not do this." It may be because they're non-confrontational. It may just be a generational quality where they will do something, but they will grumble about it. And you know what? Kudos to them because that's reflective of life. Sometimes you just got to do things.

[JIM LANG]

Yeah, absolutely.

[HINDA MANDELL]

And if you want to grumble about it, absolutely, you can do that. Only once did I really have a student make a comment to me in class—you know, I don't get why we're doing this. And I, of course, try to explain it to them again, but if it's in the middle of class, I can't really take up five, 10 minutes. So that's only one instance where it has come across.

With that student, I would describe him as being very, very logical and rational and perhaps not able to take a creative step. That's my sense of just how his brain worked. Other forms of resistance, let's see—

[JIM LANG]

What about the students who maybe have actual, they really have trouble with this physically to do something like this? I mean, do you ever have that challenge? I'm thinking about UDL stuff. To a certain extent, is there a way to make this available to everyone who maybe have a challenge physically with something like this?

[HINDA MANDELL]

So that is something I think about every semester prior to meeting my students, and that has not come across in my classroom yet. It will, I'm sure it will. And then I will absolutely be working with our disability student office. But there are different ways I think to pair people together or, depending on the nature of the disability, that is totally something that I welcome because I believe that craft-based thinking is for everyone. And I just had a researcher out of Alabama who works with disability rights and craft contact me about discussing how we can expand craft access for those who have disabilities. And it is something I'm interested in, but it hasn't come across my classroom yet. So everyone who has been in my classroom where I've taught crochet or hand-stitching or now bead-weaving, every single person has gone from no awareness, no experience to very strong basic competency.

I've left no one behind because in part, if I'm requiring this for a course grade, I have to be sure that you can do it, at a minimum, in a competent way, or at a maximum, in an amazing way.

[JIM LANG]

So helping them develop that competency, how much time is spent in class doing this?

[HINDA MANDELL]

A lot of time.

[JIM LANG]

Really?

[HINDA MANDELL]

And in fact, a lot of time because—so this is one of the reasons why I love to do it is because it allows me to relate to students in totally different ways. And it's a way to get personal while also being very professional. We're in each other's physical spaces, and you're much closer because when you're trying to teach someone crochet, you cannot do it at a distance. So oftentimes I will take their yarn and their crochet hook. I always ask, I always ask before I touch someone's materials. And when I take their yarn, it can be sweaty. (both laugh) It's always warm. You're literally feeling their physical presence. And so you're just in their space in a different way, and it makes things so much more—

[JIM LANG]

Humans connected with each other. Yeah, I get it. I totally get it. Yeah. Yeah, that sounds good.

[HINDA MANDELL]

Yeah. And I do provide them online resources to learn certain hand work strategies outside of class, but I always, always show them because it also shows them that not everything can be learned online. So you see how to do a single crochet or a double crochet or a cast-on. It looks so easy. Everything looks beautiful online. But then part of it is this existential problem of, like, wait, why can't I do it? Wait. Oh, I can't do it because I actually haven't tried it. Oh, this is what learning is. It's literally figuring it out.

[JIM LANG]

So there has to be some reflection work they're doing. So do they write something about this, or how do they process it back to you what they've experienced?

[HINDA MANDELL]

Yes, I love that. So I collect sticky notes from them at the end of class.

[JIM LANG]

(laughs) Okay. Still physical objects, right? Material objects there. Yeah. Interesting.

[HINDA MANDELL]

Exactly. And I use a six-word prompt. I say in six words, it has to be six words—again, because let's do a little bit of brain flossing here—in six words, tell me about your experience crocheting. So for Persuasion, they had to crochet a pair of wristwarmers and a matching chunky hat. Okay. So tell me your experience about crocheting your wristwarmer today in six words.

[JIM LANG]

Wow. (laughs)

[HINDA MANDELL]

Or I'll do something like, Draw your face now that you're done crocheting today and explain it. So it's just a little creative exercise, but it gives me really good touchstone of where they're at, and they can say the funniest thing. I actually brought some with me here. This is from February of 2026 in the Persuasion class. It says—okay, so they had to reflect on a sticky note, this is beyond the six words, so they had more than six words—“Looking at my completed wristwarmers is like ...” So then they had to fill in the blank. When they look at their completed wristwarmers, this one student said, “Looking at my completed wristwarmers is like looking at my middle school art assignment. Looks scuffed, but I'm proud of it.”

[JIM LANG]

Nice. (both laugh)

[HINDA MANDELL]

I mean, they say funny things.

[JIM LANG]

Yeah, that's great. (laughs) Yeah. So instead of going home with a stack of papers, you go home with a stack of sticky notes.

[HINDA MANDELL]

I love reading their sticky notes. And so again, it's like when you teach, there's such the hierarchy, even though I know today they try to minimize the hierarchy. And part of hierarchy is frustration. I may become frustrated with my students, they may become frustrated with me. But doing something like this, when you can laugh, it just really softens the heart. And I think that's really good for students and for instructors.

[JIM LANG]

So let's try to make the connection here. What are the bigger assessments in this course? What are they producing at the end of the semester or throughout the semester? The higher-stake stuff. What is that work?

[HINDA MANDELL]

Of the Persuasion class?

[JIM LANG]

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[HINDA MANDELL]

Okay. So first of all, because we do so much hands-on work and because the relational aspect of class is so important, learning how to interact with your classmates and your instructors and being present, attendance was a huge part of the grade. I think attendance was like 35% of the grade.

[JIM LANG]

Wow, okay.

[HINDA MANDELL]

You need to show up. So that was huge. Also, I had a book, a persuasion book, and it's something about the effect of persuasion in American life. And I provided a majority of the

readings, don't get me in trouble (laughs), but I provided them with the readings, and there were a series of quizzes that they had to write. So basically they had to, based on the assigned readings, they needed to come up with questions, could be true/false, could be multiple choice, could be short answer, could be fill in the blank. I think it was maybe like 10 or 12 questions per quiz. They provide me with the answer, and they provide me with the page number.

[JIM LANG]

But was there some kind of final project at the end of the semester?

[HINDA MANDELL]

There was a final project. So as a class, we watched the movie *Spotlight*. This won the Best Picture Oscar from 2016, I think. And that was about the major sex-abuse scandal in the Boston Archdiocese. It's a fictionalized portrayal of the true story. It follows investigative journalists from *The Boston Globe*. And how did they get neighborhood folks where the children were abused by neighborhood priests, how did they get them to talk? How did they actually get them to go on the record, which was so important in order to break the story? And so they were using persuasive skills. And we looked at the different theories from the book that the investigative journalists actually deployed in real life. So we watched that as a class. We took, I think it was like two class periods to watch the film. And then they had to write an essay selecting, maybe it was like three, four, or five theories from the book, and to explain how those persuasion theories were enacted through that film. So that was due during the final exam period.

[JIM LANG]

So traditional final assignment project, so that is paired with the more innovative stuff that's happening in class, but then tying that into the larger, more traditional kind of work that a student would do in a higher education classroom.

So we have just time for one last sort of question here, which is I guess more a comment than a question, so I'd like to hear your thoughts about this. I think what I really hear from you is something I've been arguing, too, to faculty members is making more and more use of the time together in class and really prioritizing that work, which I think is becoming more and more important for us as we go forward in higher education. So it seems like you really put a lot of emphasis on that time in class, not only for the crocheting, but it sounds like you're also having them do the sticky notes in class, watching the movie in class.

A lot of that stuff is happening in class, and the attendance is a priority, which is also in the evaluation of the students of the semester, too. So would you just want to say how you think about this, as the class time has this really high priority for you?

[HINDA MANDELL]

Oh yeah. Class time is number one. And in part that speaks to success in life. You got to show up. You got to show up, and you got to show that you care, and you got to show up and you got to participate. And of course there are many, many different ways to participate. And with the hands-on activities, it's like you're forced to do it. And then of course I walk around, and I talk to everyone. And so you don't need to talk in front of the whole class, but chit-chat with me as we are working on these hands-on projects. And it also forces students to ask questions because if they're uncertain about how to do something, this isn't a matter of really figuring it out. It's figuring it out with asking for help and seeing others around you do it, too. So there's a bit of that positive peer pressure.

Also, if we're spending time together, let's get to know each other and enjoy each other and see what happens from there. Let's just make it more personal. And by personal, I think what I'm really saying is, focused and bringing ourselves to the table in kind of a new way.

[JIM LANG]

It hits so many objectives we have for students in higher education, that sense of building communities, reflecting their learning, becoming makers. I'm really impressed with your approach here, and I think it just does a lot of good stuff for students and for teachers, as well.

So for the folks who are listening to this podcast, I really encourage you to think about what could this look like for your class? How can you make your students become makers in class of some kind, whether it may be crafts or something that relates to your discipline? And so I hope folks can hear this message and be creative in their classroom. So thanks so much for coming on and talking to me about this stuff. It's fascinating. Thank you.

[HINDA MANDELL]

Oh, thank you for the opportunity and having the chance to reflect on this and kind of crystallize some of my thinking. So I'm grateful.

[JIM LANG]

You bet.

(cheerful upbeat music)

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