

# Go ONLINE!

*Reconfiguring Writing Courses  
for the New, Virtual World*



Edited by  
Laura Gray-Rosendale and Steven Rosendale

COVID-19's impacts revealed that teaching writing online was no longer merely an issue of convenience or economic necessity—it was critical to public health and equity concerns as well. Now higher education faces one of its greatest historical challenges, expanding online offerings to fully engage and support students around the world. Gathering together educators who teach writing at college and graduate levels using creative hybrid, blended, and online/remote/virtual modes, this book should be required reading for all teachers and administrators. The volume features those new to online teaching alongside experienced online writing teachers. Referencing the latest research in online teaching and writing, contributors share stories of crucial successes as well as unforeseen difficulties. Essays address compelling concerns such as engaging diversity and cultural inclusivity, social justice, as well as global learning in online writing courses; radically reshaping graduate seminars for online delivery; flipping classrooms to promote more successful writing instruction; fostering greater community within online writing classrooms; examining the problems and possibilities of Learning Management Systems for teaching writing; sustaining remote writing-centered archival research; avoiding Zoom fatigue in writing classes by using design thinking; utilizing expressive arts in online writing classes; mentoring doctoral students online; constructing meaningful approaches to online peer writing feedback; as well as making access and inclusivity central to online writing course design.

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Go Online!

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# Introduction

LAURA GRAY-ROSENDALE AND STEVEN ROSENDALE

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On June 16, 2021 The United States Institute of Education Sciences released their preliminary findings about the various impacts that the COVID pandemic had had thus far on college students and higher education altogether in a report titled “2019–20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:20): First Look at the Impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic on Undergraduate Student Enrollment, Housing, and Finances.” As the title of this report makes clear, the Institute was concerned with examining many aspects of exactly how the pandemic impacted students’ lives. In their summary of findings, the writers detail a wide variety of discoveries such as the following: students withdrew from their colleges at far higher rates; students who were already struggling financially were more likely to move back in with their families and/or to have unstable housing situations; students who identified as gender nonconforming had far more trouble finding adequate housing; students of color experienced far higher rates of food insecurity; and childcare became a much more difficult issue for female students in particular (4). To put it mildly, college students’ lives were radically changed as well as made increasingly more and more difficult—with a disproportionate number of already marginalized students bearing the fullest brunt of these effects. These issues were also, of course, exacerbated by larger social, political, and cultural forces that were occurring at the exact same historical moment, forces that led, for example, to both the important strengthening of the Black Lives Matter

Movement as well as some disturbing events that signaled backlash to these crucial strides.

Significantly, this report begins with one of the most essential changes in colleges and universities that resulted from the pandemic in the United States—it altered the entire structure of higher education in ways that no one could have fully anticipated. In short, the writers of the report note that faculty members (many of whom had little or radically different previous experiences teaching online) and students (many of whom had taken very few or not taken any online courses before) were now required to negotiate most if not all of their courses in an unfamiliar, online learning format. According to their study, “Overall, 87 percent of students experienced a disruption or change in their enrollment, with 84 percent having some or all classes moved to online-only instruction” (4). This was a truly seismic shift in higher education within the US., impacting all faculty and students in crucial ways, and promising to have lasting reverberations.

Given the nature of this shift, The United States Department of Higher Education has been forced to fully consider what the positive as well as negative effects of the pandemic have been on higher education as well as how they might be better addressed as we move into the future. “VOLUME 3 – 2021 ED COVID-19 HANDBOOK Strategies for Safe Operation and Addressing the Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education Students, Faculty, and Staff,” also published in June 2021, sets forth “best practices” for potential in-person learning in a post-pandemic environment. However, it also reflects upon the recent past, assessing some of the effects that the abrupt change to online learning had on teachers and students in higher education during the pandemic. This document, much like the report from The United States Institute of Education Sciences, mentions various studies that reveal a distinct digital divide amongst students, describing that oftentimes adequate access to technology posed a real problem for students: “Nearly 60% of learners noted ‘having access to stable, high-speed internet access’ as a challenge” (18). Later this report also notes that the switch to online learning hit culturally marginalized students especially hard:

According to a nationally representative 2020 Strada and Gallup poll of more than 10,000 respondents, Black and Latino (or Hispanic) Americans reported higher rates of canceling or changing educational plans due to COVID-19. Tribal colleges and universities experienced an average decrease in student enrollment of 19% during the COVID-19 pandemic. (20)

In addition, the writers of the report point to a variety of studies that suggest that at times problems in course design were directly responsible for some of the concerns that students encountered. In order to combat this second problem, the writers suggest that “instructional designers and technologists” need to better “collaborate with faculty on the design and delivery of courses” and offer more

training in online learning altogether (18). They do note important strides that teachers were able to make in quickly pivoting to the online learning environment. But they also contend that “despite the gains in perceived effectiveness of online learning, student engagement still presents a challenge. Overwhelmingly, a lack of engagement and interactivity has been identified as a particularly complex challenge in online and digital learning in higher education” (19). In order to address these concerns, they suggest that we will need to make significant changes to higher education such as the following: “1. Invest in professional development opportunities focused on digital learning, 2. Explore different models of delivery, 3. Leverage technology to promote student engagement, and 4. Invest in digital learning records to promote student mobility” (21–24).

In their essay “Online University Teaching During and After the Covid-19 Crisis: Refocusing Teacher Presence and Learning Activity,” Chrysi Rapanta et al. also offer a study of the myriad effects of the rapid move to online learning that was created by the pandemic. They echo the above suggestions from “VOLUME 3 – 2021 ED COVID-19 HANDBOOK Strategies for Safe Operation and Addressing the Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education Students, Faculty, and Staff” with their conclusion that

For higher education institutions around the world to be competitive (again), evidence of faculty preparedness in terms of professionalism is necessary. Online teaching is an essential part of such professional preparedness but not the only one. Universities, now more than ever, should invest in teacher professional development of their faculty, for them to be updated on effective pedagogical methods with or without the use of online technologies. (942)

In other words, they argue, based upon their extensive research, that we need to come to understand how higher education can better support faculty pedagogies as well as offer faculty more relevant kinds of professional development opportunities—with the use of teaching using online technologies being just one key component.

Importantly, though, the pandemic’s effects on higher education were in no way confined by US national borders. Rather they had tremendous global impacts. In their essay titled “Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Life of Higher Education Students: A Global Perspective,” Aleksander Aristovnik et al. survey over 30,000 students from 62 countries. Their study reveals the ways in which students across the globe seemed to experience real emotional and psychological difficulties adjusting to the idea of “the ‘new normal’; namely, education from a distance” (22). They also discovered the ways in which students both perceived their online education experiences as well as some of the inherent contradictions within those perceptions:

Amid the worldwide lockdown and transition to online learning students were most satisfied with the support provided by teaching staff and their universities' public relations. Still, deficient computer skills and the perception of a higher workload prevented them from perceiving their own improved performance in the new teaching environment. (1)

In other words, even though many students were generally quite successful in navigating this new technological environment, according to these scholars' research, their lack of confidence with technology as well as higher workload expectations kept them from fully realizing their own success.

Whether instructors and their students were forced to move online within the United States or elsewhere around the globe, the pandemic's effects were incredibly far-reaching. And the pandemic's impacts on teachers of writing—people who often rely heavily on personal, face-to-face interactions with their students in order to effectively instruct them—were particularly significant. In large part this edited collection is a response to the pandemic situation and the ways in which it demanded that we all embrace distance education—like it or not.

The book features the voices of both very experienced online teachers of writing as well as more novice online teachers, teachers working within the United States as well as elsewhere in the world, charting their complicated experiences teaching writing in online environments during the pandemic. They share both stories of important triumphs as well as unforeseen problems and difficulties. All of the essays reference the latest research in online teaching and writing. While there have been various excellent books published about teaching writing and online learning, this collection is unique in its examination of the particularities of teaching writing during a pandemic situation, detailing the ways in which these experiences will continue to shape our teaching of writing in the many years to come. And, unlike other compelling books that have focused mainly on scholarly and theoretical approaches to teaching writing and online learning, the chapters within this collection importantly weave together contemporary scholarly research with teachers' very specific teaching experiences as well as some of their key strategies, novel assignments, alternative rubrics, and new, creative curricular choices that they utilized during the pandemic. Finally, this book addresses students' and teachers' diverse perspectives, considers issues of social justice and equity, and examines the global repercussions of teaching writing online.

This book became a very important project for us both for a number of crucial reasons. Firstly, we knew that no book like it yet existed. So much of this was happening to teachers and students so quickly that there was barely time to react, let alone reflect on the effects of what was happening to us all—and, as a result, there was a real need for scholars and teachers of writing to have access to a book of this kind. Secondly, we came to this project because of our own particular experiences as veteran teachers of writing who were—like so many



others—suddenly forced to radically rethink our approaches to teaching during the pandemic.

Laura's background is in Rhetoric and Composition with a specific focus on literacy studies and autobiographical writing. Prior to the pandemic, she had been teaching almost exclusively asynchronous, online writing classes, really since online teaching systems first emerged many years ago. Laura was in large part responsible for designing and delivering the entirely online Master's degree in Rhetoric, Writing, and Digital Media Studies at Northern Arizona University, one that has existed for close to twenty years and caters to a very diverse group of students both within the United States as well as around the world. When the pandemic hit, she was fortunate to already have quite a bit of knowledge about online teaching models and methodologies. In addition, she had studied much of the existing research in online learning and published research about remote education and had lots of experiences with retooling her courses and their assignments as well as adjusting them based on her teaching experiences and students' feedback.

Steve's background is in American Literature, with particular specialties in ecocriticism, environmental literature, and working class literatures. While Steve also had a wealth of online teaching experiences over many years, a far greater proportion of his teaching experiences prior to the pandemic had been face-to-face. For many years, Steve enjoyed being in the classroom and working closely with a diverse group of students in that particular mode. While he was certainly interested in online teaching, usually taught an online course or two every year, and was quite aware of the scholarship and teaching approaches relevant to remote learning, he did not prefer this mode to teaching face-to-face and being in a physical classroom with his students.

In spite of these differences in our backgrounds and experiences with the online teaching of writing prior to the pandemic, both of us encountered quite similar experiences with moving to teaching online throughout this period. We both found ourselves connecting with our students in new and different ways during our pandemic teaching as students' personal lives and experiences necessarily became more central and had to be more fully integrated into the very fabric of our courses. Oftentimes we found that we and our students developed more full, meaningful, and lasting relationships in our new online courses, in spite of the distance that technology sometimes creates. Another positive that came out of our own experiences was that many of our course choices had to become far more intentional. Though we had both revamped all of our courses many, many times over the years, we found that the pressures of the pandemic demanded that we design our assignments and select our course readings more carefully than ever before, sometimes restructuring everything entirely, to best suit students' new needs. Finally, as much as possible, we learned ways to really utilize technology to

make our teaching experiences and our students' learning experiences better, not just to tack technology onto our other pedagogical choices because the situation necessitated it.

However, we also both experienced some real difficulties with teaching writing online once the pandemic was underway. Though Laura had many online classes seemingly "ready to go," for example, her familiarity with online learning did not extend to the wide variety of real-time interaction platforms. While she had used Bb Learn Collaborate in certain contexts and published scholarship about it in the *Journal of Basic Writing*, her knowledge of such platforms did not extend much further. Likewise, in her teaching during the pandemic, she found that lack of access to strong internet connections would sometimes negatively impact her students of color in particular. Many of her students living in remoter areas of the nearby Navajo Nation, for example, did not have internet connections within their homes and therefore had to complete much of their schoolwork sitting in their cars in parking lots, getting their Wi-Fi from buses that had been outfitted with technology for just this purpose.

Likewise, as Laura reconsidered her online courses, she had to think a good deal more about her online presence as an instructor. She felt that the pandemic itself as well as students' growing participation in social justice movements really required this of her as an instructor. Laura had not previously incorporated many video components into her courses using Kaltura. In order to make her classes more inviting to her students during these troubled times, she decided to spend a good deal of energy scripting and filming videos to embed in all of her online courses as well as creating other interactive course components. Taking on these new challenges in the online learning environment was often difficult, complicated, and rather time-consuming. But she knew that doing this would help foster a far stronger community within her online classes, something that students would desperately need during this time.

Similarly, though Steve was no novice to online teaching, all of a sudden he had to make many significant changes to his typical course offerings. Very quickly he had to shift a suite of classes that had been very successful (in various iterations and for many years) in largely face-to-face formats into completely online versions. Figuring out how to adapt his lectures—which often had significant discussion components involving energetic, spontaneous student interactions—to operate within a real-time Zoom format, for instance, was not always an easy prospect. Likewise, facilitating group work amongst diverse students in Zoom "break out sessions" was sometimes very effective and other times did not work as well. Through trial and error Steve found that the ways in which he set up break out sessions and the specific prompts that he asked his students to follow could make or break whether these sessions approximated anything like the beneficial elements of the peer group work that can occur in face-to-face classes. And Steve

found that not only did he have many students from around the United States in his Zoom classrooms. He was also working with a significant number of international students who had effectively become stuck in the United States during the pandemic. Away from their families and friends, some for the first time in their lives, they would need a good deal more intellectual and emotional support.

Throughout all of our experiences teaching writing online during the pandemic, we both discovered one thing was absolutely certain—uncertainty. Learning to be increasingly flexible, improvisational, and adaptable in terms of teaching approaches, technologies utilized, and content assigned was absolutely essential in this strange new world.

The writers featured in this collection encountered similar concerns. We hope that readers will appreciate learning about their varied experiences teaching writing online during the pandemic, perhaps seeing some of their own experiences reflected here. We also hope that readers will gain important new tools and techniques that they can readily apply to their own teaching of writing online—whether this teaching is accomplished during a crisis like the pandemic or in the many years to follow.

The book begins with Patricia R. Webb’s chapter, “Designing for Connection in the Online Classroom: Lessons Learned in the Time of a Pandemic.” Prior to the pandemic, Webb had a great deal of experience both teaching online writing classes as well as conducting research about online learning. However, Webb still found herself scrambling a bit to make her classes as helpful to her students as possible, particularly her class in “Theories of Literacy”—a course that was originally scheduled to be taught face-to-face. In this course Webb addresses the ways in which dominant literacies serve to privilege some while silencing others. After moving the course online during the pandemic, Webb found that she had to completely alter the final part of her course to better suit her students’ changing needs. Her students did not just want to simply analyze social and cultural inequities as they might typically do in her course. They wanted to try to find real solutions to the problems they saw at work. They wanted to have a hand in actually changing them. As a result, Webb retooled this part of her course completely, allowing her students’ to make crucial choices about the course design and assignments. Webb shares two of the compelling student projects that came out of this course. These projects reveal the students’ deep connectedness to their online learning when they could be directly involved in the decision-making processes concerning the course itself. Their projects expose just how much students want and need to have greater agency, to engage in truly meaningful work, to have a hand in making social change, as well as to connect with others across the globe. In the end, Webb shows us practical ways that online classes can sometimes foster more supportive communities than traditional face-to-face classes.

In Chapter Two, “Disrupting Writing and Systemic Disruption,” Kathryn Broyles considers not only the positive possibilities of teaching writing online (both during the pandemic and beyond) but also its darker side and its potential negative effects. Broyles examines the ways in which Learning Management Systems themselves as well as other online data collection services that monitor teacher and student activities can undermine the very goals of the best online learning contexts that teachers seek to create, rendering them little more than examples of surveillance-in-action and metrics that can be used to justify administrative decision-making. Cautioning readers to consider the ways in which such online platforms are being used against teachers and their students, she suggests that we need to construct new online learning experiences that allow students to genuinely thrive and learn, to venture into the processes of discovery and possibility, rather than being hampered by systems that seek to limit their freedoms of expression and abilities. Instead, Broyles aims to create opportunities for students to expand the very boundaries of their own thinking. In the end, Broyles asks all teachers of writing online to embrace “success and sustainability,” calling upon us to no longer simply be servants to Information Technology’s desires and whims. Instead, she urges, we must use IT to our own ends—or only insofar as it actually better informs and strengthens our most successful student-centered educational practices.

In “Presence as Participation: Reflections on COVID-19’s Impact on a Graduate Seminar at an Urban Research University,” Chapter Three, written by Michael Harker, Keaton Lamle, and Rachel Woods, a professor and two of his graduate students reflect upon their unanticipated and rather mixed experiences of moving to an online environment during the pandemic. When COVID-19 required that Harker quickly bring his face-to-face graduate seminar on “Enlightenment Rhetoric” online, both he and his two graduate students had to confront exactly what “participation” might mean in this new online environment. What they realized is that the conceptions of participation afforded them by online learning platforms are severely limited at best and rather suspect at worst. At times all of them found themselves relying on metrics for both assessing as well as gauging their own levels of participation. They found that the binaristic conceptions of “participation” provided by online environments did not even begin to adequately capture what they or their students were actually doing. Drawing upon Genevieve Critel’s research on “student participation,” other scholarly perspectives on participation and online learning, as well as their own experiences, the authors reveal the many ways in which instructors as well as students might radically rethink understanding and assessing participation both within online as well as other hybrid and face-to-face teaching contexts.

Tara Moore’s Chapter Four, “Flipping Composition Instruction: Amplifying Flexibility, Increasing Delight,” examines the very specific ways in which the

pandemic led to a significant shift in her teaching of composition—from a more traditional face-to-face approach to that of a flipped course model. Using a backwards design approach, Moore began making significant changes to her course in order to accommodate students' changing needs during the pandemic and to eliminate work in the class that was not directly related to her course's learning outcomes. For example, Moore decided to move her typical in-person lectures online, creating short, engaging videos focused on key topics that students could watch at their leisure. In doing so, Moore was able to effectively use class time to foster greater human interaction and community—to make her class more fully student-centered in ways it had never quite been before. Drawing from an IRB-approved survey of her students' responses to her new pedagogical choices, Moore offers a series of key findings. Ultimately she asserts that within a flipped classroom design students can gain far greater agency since they are being called upon to make their own distinct choices about their learning within a more flexible course structure, one that engages them more fully and on multiple levels.

Chapter Five, Abby Schroering's "Writing as a Team Sport: Cultivating Community in the Online Writing Classroom," examines exactly what happened to her face-to-face composition class when she was suddenly forced to move it online. Immediately she was faced with the difficulties of creating both a cognitive and a social presence in a virtual world. Tackling these problems head-on enabled her to better foster a robust online student community and to encourage students' learning and growth. Schroering reveals the ways in which moving online also made her rethink the typical peer feedback model writing teachers often rely upon, instead embracing true student-to-student collaboration. Schroering takes the reader into the particular ways in which she restructured her course, tracing how she accomplished her goals through both asynchronous as well as synchronous approaches. She also reveals the specific course policies and routines she designed that better enabled her students to connect with her as well as with one another in this new online environment. Finally, Schroering shows that some of the key lessons that she learned during the pandemic can usefully be carried into all of our future teaching of writing—whether this is accomplished in online teaching environments, face-to-face interactions, or some combination.

In Chapter Six, "Doing Archival Research from Home," Lynée Lewis Gaillet details her various experiences having to unexpectedly bring her archival research course online during the pandemic. Working with her graduate student, Jess Rose, Gaillet had to completely reconfigure her course assignments, rethink her general course design, and reconsider how to approximate as well as find alternatives to the experiences of students being able to publicly interact with archives themselves. Importantly, Gaillet explains the ways in which the constraints of the pandemic itself resulted in her students approaching their own research projects for her class in ways that they might not have otherwise considered as well as the

ways in which the pandemic shaped the very subjects that they chose to research. Gaillet's students' own voices are featured as they explain their projects and the issues that they encountered along the way to creating them. Gaillet and her students draw from both interdisciplinary scholarly research about working with archives as well as scholarly research about online learning, exposing the many ways in which their experiences might inevitably shape future iterations of this course as well as archival work in general. In particular, regardless of the mode of course delivery, Gaillet reveals how our teaching itself needs to change. Various online conferencing methods need to be further harnessed, hybrid curriculum designs must be better incorporated, public writing needs to be made a more central part of both archival research and teaching about archival research, and contingent faculty's roles (since they too are constantly being called upon to create new courses from scratch—across modalities—with minimal preparation) must be better understood and reassessed.

In Chapter Seven, “Avoiding Zoom Doom: Creating Online Workshops with Design Thinking” by Lance Cummings, he examines an issue that many teachers and students encountered during the pandemic—Zoom fatigue. Cummings explains that we often assume that Zoom can be used to foster the same sorts of experiences that we would create within our face-to-face classroom interactions. After all, having cameras trained on our faces allows us to see one another. In addition, Zoom interactions, in the main, occur synchronously. But Cummings suggests that Zoom, in spite of offering the possibility of creating small group breakout sessions and conversing in real-time, really does not work very well to approximate anything like the face-to-face interactions that occur within classrooms. Instead, if we do not use Zoom strategically, it may “flatten” our interactions while at the same time giving us the sense that they are in fact multi-dimensional. In an effort to combat this, Cummings urges us all to apply “design thinking” when we construct activities for Zoom contexts or to approach our course construction from a more human-centered perspective. In particular, he reveals the ways in which using digital whiteboards in Zoom was tremendously helpful for his students. Cummings takes us through a sample exercise that he does with his students that is designed to embrace a problem/solution model and that energizes students in an otherwise somewhat static Zoom environment. In the end, Cummings' chapter provides both sound theoretical grounding as well as some very practical suggestions for not only how to avoid Zoom fatigue but how to make Zoom a truly exciting, interactional, collaborative, and creative space for our students.

Chapter Eight, “Expressive Arts Curriculum in Online Writing Courses” by Peaches Hash, reveals what it was like for Hash to shift her usual approach to teaching writing—utilizing an expressive arts curriculum that often depends greatly upon face-to-face interactions within a classroom environment—to an

online setting. In her chapter, Hash draws from important scholarship that argues students need alternative methods and modes through which to express themselves (and that doing so contributes in crucial ways to the writing that they produce). She also exposes her trepidation in altering this part of her course to operate in an online environment, exactly how she finally decided to change her course to accomplish this, and the myriad valuable effects that using this approach online had on her writing students during the pandemic. As Hash shows, many of her students desperately needed this creative outlet in order to create a fuller social network online and it also helped them to make critical connections between their class writing projects and the complicated life experiences they were encountering every day. Hash not only shares her students' very positive experiences interacting with the expressive arts curriculum in her composition class. She also provides some striking examples of the artwork that her students created for her class during this very difficult time. Hash concludes her chapter by contending that not only did bringing the expressive arts curriculum online help her students to negotiate their complex emotions and concerns during the pandemic. Based on her experiences, Hash argues that all teachers creating online writing courses might benefit from employing some of these activities, strategies, and techniques, regardless of the larger world events that may be occurring at the moment.

In Chapter Nine, "Red Pen or Cursor? Assimilation and Resistance in a Digital Writing Workshop," Bonnie S. Sunstein, Michael Goldberg, and Claudia Pozzobon Potratz begin their piece by drawing on Maxine Hairston's notion that while paradigms have often shifted within Writing Studies over the years, the specific ways in which we teach as well as approach the actual tasks of writing oftentimes do not adapt sufficiently to account for these changes. The study that the authors conducted (and that they outline in their chapter) covers multiple semesters during which they co-taught their course "Approaches to Teaching Writing." They examine their experiences teaching this course face-to-face, hybrid, and online, both before as well as after the pandemic began. Citing their students' own responses to class assignment prompts as well as their students' direct commentary about their experiences within the course itself, the writers study a number of significant issues. They expose how their students—most of whom are headed into writing and teaching-related careers—view the ways in which digital tools are shaping their own writing as students, understand their digital collaborations with other students on their writing, as well as adjust their responses to evaluating their own students' writing. This study reveals that whether this course is taught in person, hybrid, or online, while their students are clearly "digital natives" in many ways, their students are still struggling quite a bit with how to interact with one another as well as how to negotiate issues related to their writing in this new digital world. In the end, the authors reveal a number of crucial findings: their students still need a good deal of help both

fully understanding and discovering their own places within this shifting digital landscape; their students often surprisingly have greater appreciation for the old-school approaches to receiving feedback than they do for online ones; and, in spite of the various limitations they see at work in new technological approaches to learning and teaching, their students are still trying to make them work in expansive and compelling ways within both their own writing and teaching of writing.

Chapter Ten, “Practical and Transferable: The Quest to Design Online Writing Instruction for Mentoring Professional Doctoral Students” by Nicholas R. Wersé, describes the online writing center he created at Baylor University as well as what he learned as a result of carefully researching the ways in which the writing consultants and the doctoral students who visited the writing center interacted with each other. Wersé’s data showed that certain key writing topics were emerging again and again. As a result, Wersé determined to design and build a self-paced, online writing course specifically for distance education doctoral students who were writing their dissertations. While he constructed the course mainly prior to the pandemic’s arrival, Wersé found that the fact that he had built this course for online delivery (in conjunction with the course’s student-centered structure and very flexible format) became absolutely essential once the pandemic arrived. Drawing upon theories concerning online learning as well as adult learning, Wersé reveals both the contexts and the student needs that shaped his desire to create such a course in the first place. Then he outlines this class, a very well-crafted, eight-module online writing course, in detail. As Wersé notes, the first four modules concentrate more upon prewriting and organizational strategies in an effort to aid doctoral students during the earlier invention and discovery phases of dissertation writing while the remaining modules teach doctoral students about particular compositional approaches that they can use in the midst of the writing process itself. Wersé’s choice to create such a course exposes our need as writing teachers—whether we are undergoing an online move precipitated by a pandemic or just adapting to our students’ changing needs—to strategically create online courses for our students that truly match their own complex lives rather than ones that may rub up against or even conflict directly with them.

In Chapter Eleven, “Making a P-A-T-H to Transformation: Showcasing the Need for Culturally Inclusive Discussion-Based Teaching in the Online Classroom,” Melissa Toomey and Jill M. Swirsky share their various experiences teaching writing online both before as well as during the pandemic. They offer some essential ways in which building “small teaching” acts into students’ interactions with online discussion boards can be tremendously beneficial to students’ overall engagement and learning. Including facets of both intrapersonal and interpersonal dialogue, they expose how instructors can utilize a more fully inclusive pedagogy, one that encompasses four key strategies: “1. Purposeful Thinking, 2. Alternatives and Choice, 3. Teaching Collaboration as Agency, and 4. Hindsight and



Metacognitive Reflection (P-A-T-H).” Based on their own experiences teaching online as well as direct feedback that they received from their students, Toomey and Swirsky offer specific suggestions for how we all might usefully revise our online discussion prompts and other assignments to more fully incorporate students’ multiple abilities and interests while also valuing and celebrating their diverse cultural experiences.

In Chapter Twelve, “Reconfiguring Peer Feedback for the Virtual Composition Classroom,” Dennis Koyama (a seasoned teacher of online classes) and Ghada Gherwash (a teacher far less familiar with the online environment) explain how the pandemic demanded that they both bring their writing classes online. They also detail the various ways in which they were able to help each other to accomplish this. Though they were many, many miles apart—Koyama was teaching at Sophia University in Tokyo while Gherwash was working from Colby College in Maine—they collaborated with one another to devise as well as continually revise their online peer feedback approaches. As a result, both of their very different student populations were able to effectively succeed on their writing assignments. The two authors explain the differences in their teaching contexts, their professional backgrounds, and the actual courses they were forced to redesign. In doing so, they reveal the different experiences that they had bringing their approaches to peer feedback online. They also expose both the challenges they encountered as well as how they were able to finally succeed in creating valuable peer feedback approaches that can ultimately be utilized whether teaching face-to-face or online. Throughout the process of revamping their approaches to incorporating peer feedback, they continually collaborated with one another, sharing tips and ideas that could be adapted to their different cultural contexts. They close their chapter with a series of suggestions for teaching writing—whether face-to-face or online—that can be very useful for us all. They also offer their final reflections on both their collaborative work to create effective online peer feedback in the midst of a pandemic as well as their collaborative efforts to write the chapter itself. And, finally, in their appendices they share the specific worksheets and rubrics that they utilized to facilitate strong peer feedback between their students.

The book concludes with Chapter Thirteen, “Rhetoric, Empathy, and Service: Cultivating a Craft of Access in (and Beyond) Course Design” by Brian Le Lay. Le Lay considers a nexus of issues that are too often overlooked when we think about teaching writing courses, whether in face-to-face, hybrid, or online environments—course design, disability, and access. Drawing from scholarship in both rhetorical theory and disability studies, Le Lay argues that viewing disabilities as static and unchanging has negatively impacted the ways in which we conceive of how to design our courses and take up issues of access altogether. Instead, Le Lay urges us to adopt a craft mindset, one that draws heavily from feminism and views about empathy, placing the student rather than the instructor

at the center of inquiry as well as design decisions. Le Lay concludes his essay with a list of specific practices that teachers and researchers can begin to adopt—some of which sprang from his experiences teaching during the pandemic—in order to better serve both students and teachers with disabilities.

All of the writers featured in this book share significant and compelling experiences of teaching writing during the COVID pandemic. And all of these writers offer crucial suggestions about how we can take what we have learned during the pandemic and apply it to a wide range of future teaching situations. Of course, we do not know what the future holds—what new challenges may await us just around the corner either within the teaching of writing or within higher education in general. Student populations are changing. Student enrollments are fluctuating. Student needs are developing in new directions. But it is clear from what we discovered during the pandemic that teaching writing in a digital environment is here to stay and will only continue to grow by leaps and bounds in the years to come. Whatever happens next will be exciting indeed and, as has been the case over these past few years, it will likely require all of us to continue to rethink the very ways in which we teach our students about the writing process itself.

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# Designing for Connection in the Online Classroom: Lessons Learned in the Time of a Pandemic

PATRICIA R. WEBB

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*“The COVID-19 pandemic period should be regarded as an opportunity for educators to consider how to push the distance education system forward.”*

*Secil Tumen Alyildiz (332)*

## INTRODUCTION

As the immediate effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on our educational environments begin to subside with the widespread use of vaccines, we can begin to contemplate what we have learned from teaching in pandemic conditions. The pandemic gave us a fortuitous opportunity to critically reflect on our assumptions about teaching and learning online. In fact, the changes we faced during the pandemic *required* that we re-consider our pedagogical approaches. Even those who were resistant to online teaching (either because they were critical of it or unfamiliar with it) found themselves having to abruptly re-tool their teaching for online environments. Being thrown into nearly ubiquitous online learning certainly brought to light serious inequities that needed (and still need) to be addressed, but the situation also made clear the creative possibilities offered by online education. Instead of distancing teachers from their students, pandemic online teaching illustrated the ways that technologies can be used to increase a

sense of teacher and student presence as well as to engage deeply with students' needs in order to make class material relevant to their lives. As a result of having no choice but to teach and learn online, both teachers and students began to see the potentials of online learning.

One set of lessons we can take away from this experience is the knowledge of how to manage educationally when crises arise (because future crises will arise, although hopefully not on the scale of this pandemic). However, our experiences teaching online during the pandemic also offer us pedagogical insights about online learning possibilities that can be drawn on as we move forward into a new normal. As we move out of the pandemic, we can now reflect on what we have learned and make careful, evidence-based and experience-based decisions about what we want our “normal” to look like, instead of rushing to return to pre-pandemic business-as-usual. We can draw on our experiences with online learning to re-think the possibilities we imagine for online learning and to challenge outdated critiques of online learning while creatively addressing the potential limits of teaching and learning in that environment. The key question facing us now is: What can we learn from mandatory online teaching during the pandemic that we can incorporate deliberately into our courses in the future when we have time to carefully design them?

In order to explore answers to this question, I analyze an upper level “Theories of Literacy” course I designed in Summer 2020 and then taught in Fall 2020—in the heart of the pandemic. Describing how I adapted both my designing and teaching to fit the needs that my students brought to the class in the middle of a pandemic helps to illustrate three key ideas:

1. the ways in which we can use the online environment to complement the course content and learning outcomes,
2. the importance of flexible teaching that helps our students resiliently respond to and engage with life on life's terms—life skills that will be of great benefit to them as they move forward in their professional and personal lives, and
3. the important ways in which online technologies can actually enhance our sense of connection to communities.

In this chapter, I explain my original design of the course during Summer 2020, briefly showing how I built a course that I thought would be responsive to students' needs during the uncertain times of the pandemic. I then detail how during the Fall 2020 semester I revised the course's final module based on what I learned about the specific needs of that group of students. By listening to and valuing students' desires to participate in cultural change, I revised the final module mid-semester so that students were able to research and engage in ways of making a

positive difference in the literacy inequalities we had discussed throughout the semester. After examining the ways in which students navigated the online environment during a pandemic, I conclude with an analysis of the larger pedagogical lessons about online teaching that were highlighted by my students' engagement with the course projects.

## DESIGNING COURSES IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

When the first case of the Covid-19 virus was announced at my university in January 2020, little did any of us know how rapidly we would move to completely online learning for all classes. Under these unprecedented conditions, teachers scrambled mid-semester to revamp on-ground courses for synchronous online learning after Spring Break. Even instructors like me who had extensive online teaching experience faced particular challenges when we were asked to transfer on-ground learning to online synchronous learning in a short period of time. As anyone who has constructed online courses knows, the best ones are the result of extensive and careful design that takes place before the classes even begin. Because of the speed at which we had to transfer to the online environment in Spring 2020, however, there was little time to plan. Both teachers and students found themselves wrestling with new dimensions of learning, with nary a road map as a guide.

Throughout that spring semester, we gained important experience and subsequently used that experience when we had time over the summer to plan our online courses for Fall 2020. Even with this planning time, however, the uncertainty that faced the world because of the pandemic made it challenging to know in advance what our students would need in Fall 2020. We were encouraged by our institutions to teach resiliently, to pivot (which suddenly became a widely used concept) in order to be responsive to students' changing needs. Teachers frequently consider "needs" when designing courses, but during a pandemic students' needs changed on a sometimes daily basis because many students faced upheaval and change in multiple areas of their lives beyond the university, including home and work. Overall, change, upheaval, and uncertainty were the constants during the Covid-19 pandemic. How does one plan for students' needs in conditions such as that?

"ENG 393: Theories of Literacy" is a required course in our undergraduate major in Writing, Rhetorics, and Literacies (WRL), housed in the English Department at Arizona State University. The purpose of it is to provide students with a foundation in various literacy theories and to engage them in critical reflection about the material impacts of those theories. It is typically taught on-ground (as all of our degree courses are), but in Fall 2020 I taught it virtually through

Canvas and Zoom. Originally, I had designed three major projects for students to complete throughout the semester:

1. an academic essay that critically explored one of the major literacy theories we read about and discussed in class,
2. a multimodal analysis of the impact of literacy theories on a community literacy issue they selected, and
3. a critical evaluation of students' own online, digital literacy practices. Since so many areas of our lives were by necessity mediated through digital technologies, I had thought the last project would be of particular relevance to students' lives during the pandemic.

However, in Fall 2020, as we discussed the power dynamics of dominant literacy and the impacts of them on material lives, students increasingly wanted to explore ways to have a positive difference in the literacy issues facing communities. The students were not content to address and analyze the complex production of these inequities as I had planned; instead, they wanted to go beyond the problems and become involved in solutions. Feeling powerless over many things in their lives at that time, students seemed to want to claim a sense of agency. In their reflections they wrote after completing the multimodal analysis projects, students expressed an almost universal desire to do something about the issues they had each analyzed in those projects. For instance, Cassandra<sup>1</sup> wrote in her reflection:

After completing my project, my question is “what do we do now?” I know this is a great question to ask because it allows me to make ongoing changes for the betterment of society. I open my mind more as I read texts that are asking the same question, and reading people with rich backgrounds different from mine allows me to look forward and keep moving, even if there is no central solution that could appease everyone at the time.

Here, Cassandra highlighted how the texts we had been reading were making her aware of issues and doing so in ways that led her to want to take action. In her reflections, Joleen expressed a growing awareness of literacy's potential to create change:

I'm learning that literacy can be utilized in a positive manner to enact change....I would love to get in touch with an organization that is focused on providing literacy education to children through after-school programs. I know this might not be possible considering the current pandemic restrictions, but as businesses and schools begin to open up, I want to pursue some of these opportunities.

While recognizing the limits imposed by pandemic quarantines and shut-downs, Joleen still had a strong desire to use her newfound insights about literacies to

participate in making changes in her community. Likewise, Analisa emphasized how she was learning about the ways that literacy practices enact and are enacted through power dynamics, and she expressed an awareness that literacy practices could be used to challenge and change limiting power relationships:

I've learned that power is always present, we cannot escape its influence. Throughout all of its complexities, though, it is important to keep in mind that power is not sovereign, yet our present institutions would have us believe otherwise. We have to be mindful of these circuits of power and actively look towards micro solutions to encourage systemic change.

Her growing awareness of power dynamics, then, led her to want to consider ways to interrupt the current state of affairs.

After reading students' reflections on what they had learned through their multimodal analyses and seeing their desire to participate in change, I felt compelled to revise the final module in order to respond to their needs. Through our class discussions and their own research, students had begun to identify ways that they were being limited by—and sometimes harmed by—particular literacy practices. They also were learning how others in the world were being harmed by dominant forms of literacy—even forms in which they themselves participated. They began to see that their own actions created potential problems and likewise saw that their actions could enact change that would benefit both themselves and others. Throughout our class discussions, it became clear that students felt a growing sense of connection to those across the globe. News about the global impact of the pandemic led students to feel more affinity with a diverse range of communities, some very different from their own. While we each experienced it differently and were impacted by it in unique ways, there was a perceived universality of the pandemic.

As Mhairi Bowe et al. point out, research on disasters and crises illustrates the ways that “unifying community responses can buffer against distress and even boost mental well-being.” During times of crisis, “supporting community members to engage in community-based volunteering and mutual aid that allows them to connect with other community members is vital” (530). Recognizing the benefits that could be gained from encouraging students to explore the compassion they were feeling toward others, I made the decision to change the final course project from an analysis of their digital literacy practices to one that asked students to identify ways to change the literacy inequalities they had identified. Students were also asked to find a way to use technologies to participate in one of the changes they identified. I wanted to emphasize the need to resiliently respond to the circumstances they found themselves in. Despite claims that technologies can isolate us from one another, there are ways that we can use those technologies to help alleviate the sense of isolation and powerlessness. As Saltzman et al. point

out, technology can be “leveraged to raise awareness of self-care and the use of techniques to promote well-being” of both individuals and communities (S56). Based on research studies such as this, I felt it beneficial to encourage students to use technologies to connect in ways that redressed the problems. Further, I was aware that during a pandemic, technologies were sometimes the only way they could connect with communities.

Students stepped up to this project in creative ways. In the next section, I describe in-depth two students’ final projects that were layered on their multimodal analyses in order to highlight the ways that students responded to the revised assignment. While each of the students’ projects were unique, the two discussed here bring to the forefront common themes that were woven throughout the majority of the projects.

## IN-DEPTH DISCUSSION OF STUDENTS’ PROJECTS

### Cassandra’s Playlist

Cassandra was an avid music lover and as the semester progressed, she began to see connections between music and the dominant literacy practices that normalized and privileged particular behaviors. In her multimodal analysis project, she studied the ways that “music can be used as a tool to promote a standardized literacy. Patriotic music can mold groups to think that their nations are the epitome of civilization while excluding the thoughts and experiences of others.” Her interest in patriotic music came out of the main literacy questions that our readings and discussions led her to: “How does a system like our current one fall into place to a point where we accept and normalize it? Do texts truly have that much power of influence?” After studying the effects that our culture has on our perceptions of other cultures, Cassandra concluded in her multimodal analysis project that

it is important to take in different cultures’ literacies because listening rhetorically to other cultures gives us insight into how to coexist where all groups can prosper. Knowing what is important to others highlights similarities between our different cultures and shows what we all need to thrive.

In her reflections on her multimodal analysis project, Cassandra emphasized that her study of the potentially divisive nature of patriotic music led her to the following conclusion: “Expanded literacy knowledge of other cultures will allow me to understand cultures other than my own so I can create unity by finding common ground and solving issues that we may all share....Literacy should be used to connect the dots, not to ‘other.’” When it came time to explore possible solutions to the problems of patriotic music’s divisiveness for the final project,



she identified several useful strategies: “Listen to music outside of your norm, listen to songs that speak about issues or lifestyles of another culture, send music to others, and donate to music charity programs.” Throughout her Power Point presentation on possible solutions, she provided examples of people who had used music to connect to others from a variety of cultures and highlighted initiatives that encouraged diverse people’s pursuit of music. She ended her Power Point dramatically with “BE THE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE! You may think your ‘minor’ work is insignificant, but it is not!”

For her action, Cassandra chose to create a playlist that included patriotic songs from multiple countries in an effort to celebrate multiple cultures: “I chose to create a playlist because I enjoy ‘speaking’ with music. Curating a playlist made it easier to show HOW literacy works when we are not fully aware.” She hoped that through her playlist, her audience would “consider how music subconsciously (or blatantly) influences us to think, behave, and speak in a certain manner....I wanted to share the songs to show the links between power and literacy and show how even a song with no lyrics can promote a certain nation in a more worthy light than other nations.”

A secondary purpose she had for her playlist was to challenge the idea that print literacy is the most important one: “I wanted to show how we are programmed to consider some forms of communication [as] more valuable than others.” She argued in her reflections on her playlist about the value of acknowledging the importance of music as a literacy in order to pay more attention to its impact on us. After she created the playlist, she sent it to her friends and encouraged them to listen to it.

Using the digital format of a playlist helped Cassandra connect in multiple ways. It helped her connect her personal interest in music to the issues we had been discussing in class, thus extending her learning beyond the classroom. It connected her to a practice—playlist curation—that was relevant to her and would connect her newfound passion about literacy to her community in a way that they would be likely to relate to. She was passionate about the idea and the playlist provided her a way to display that passion so that she could reach her community and have an impact on them. In her reflections on her playlist, she stated that she planned to continue researching other cultures’ music in order to continue to expand her list on an ongoing basis. Clearly, she found a way to connect the theories we had been discussing to her life. At the end of the semester, she wrote that the project contributed to her learning because

it allowed me to experience literacy on a level beyond the standard one. It is hard to put it into words, but it is like learning in 3D. Through creating the playlist, I experienced how music affects me simply by listening to it and hopefully I used the literacy practice of curating a playlist to help my audience conclude how music affects us and the communities around us.

Cassandra found a way, in an online class taught during a pandemic, to connect to her community through the available digital means so that could make her message relevant to her audience. Even during quarantine, she used the class discussion to help expand her conception of connectedness between communities. She wrote:

My literacy knowledge currently will allow me to understand cultures other than my own so I can create unity by finding common ground and solving issues that we may all share. For example, reading a friend's post about issues in Ghana may allow me to find similarities in my own background and ways to help us both in the future.

Further, Cassandra identified that texts we encounter on a daily basis, like songs, can serve to create a view of the current state of affairs as preferred or given, thus erasing those whose voices and experiences are excluded by privileged dominant stories. This growing realization that the way things are was actually constructed through particular practices and choices led her to explore other ways to teach people to wake up and be critically aware of the way texts shape their thinking.

### Jolene's Website

Throughout the class, Jolene became aware of the privilege she had experienced due to her parents' economic situation. She became aware of how others did not have access to the same literacy materials and experiences that she had taken for granted growing up: "As a child, I always had access to books and parents who read to me at night. After realizing that access to literacy skills are unequally distributed, I realized how lucky I was to have been afforded this privilege." As a result of our class discussions and projects, her definitions of literacy changed:

Initially, I viewed literacy as merely one's proficiency with reading and writing. Over the course of this semester, my definition of literacy has expanded. I now see literacy in multiple aspects of my life, such as how I am privileged to have access to educational resources like technology and books, as well as a medium through which I can enact social change and promote social justice.

This awareness of the inequities that some in the community faced guided her multimodal analysis: "Throughout this semester, I became interested in examining methods to provide books and teach literacy skills to students raised in a community that lacked access to literacy resources." These realizations led her to want to find ways to make important literacy skills and knowledge more widely available to all children, not just to those who had similar privileges as she did. The conclusions she drew in her multimodal analysis were based on her analysis of how theories of literacy create an environment for inequitable practices

and distribution of resources: “Before this course, I failed to comprehend literacy in this manner. Now, I see literacy is more than just reading and writing. It is about power relations as well.” In her reflections on the multimodal project, she expressed a desire to volunteer in her community to redress the problematic power relations that currently existed.

For her final project, Jolene expanded upon her growing realizations of inequities. In her presentation of ways to redress this problem, she advocated for creating local book exchange programs, after-school literacy programs for children, and crowdfunding campaigns for literacy groups. For her own action, she created a website in which she tried to make what she was learning in class accessible to students of a variety of ages. Jolene identified that through her website she wanted to show how the literacy concepts she was learning were impactful beyond school:

When we were reading and learning about these concepts, I often found myself wishing that someone would explain where I would encounter these literacy practices outside of a school context. This is what prompted the inspiration for the project: I thought that if I had this desire, others may be interested in understanding the concepts’ real-life applicability as well.

She wanted to take what she was learning and make it accessible to others, and she felt that a website was an appropriate way to accomplish her goals:

The mode that I used was a website, organized to allow my audience to understand the connections that the literacy theories had to each other. With much of education taking place remotely, I see this website as an efficient and engaging medium for students to explore in alternative education settings. Aligning with my overall point of real-life applicability, students would likely engage with a website like this one longer than if they were listening to a teacher over Zoom.

She wanted education and learning about literacy theories to be engaging and accessible. She saw the value of helping others learn these theories because she saw that this knowledge would be powerful to them in helping them use the skills but also in helping them have critical awareness of the systemic issues related to literacy.

Overall, what we see in Jolene’s approach to the two projects is an example of a person using the available means to share what she was learning with a particular audience. She wanted her project to equalize some of the literacy inequities she saw, and she used an easily accessible space—a website—to do so. She worked to connect to communities that she was not necessarily a part of in order to try to equalize some of the literacy inequities she had become aware of in the class. She used her experience in an online class format to guide the way she designed her own website, reflecting on what online strategies were most helpful for her own learning and trying to replicate those in her project. For instance, she deliberately

used a significant number of visuals because she felt those made the theoretical concepts more understandable to a wider range of audience members. Thus, she found ways to use distance learning as an inspirational framework to connect to communities.

## LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC

My students' responses to the projects in the "Theories of Literacy" course along with the other outcomes of teaching this course have led me to realize three larger lessons about teaching online in general that, hopefully, will impact our teaching in the future:

1. Online environments can effectively complement the course content,
2. flexible online course design and delivery is crucial in honing students' resiliency, and
3. online environments can effectively enhance connections to communities.

### Online Environments Complement Course Content

In *The Manifesto for Teaching Online*, Sian Bayne et al. argue that "online can be the privileged mode. Distance is a positive principle, not a deficit" (133). They contend that "digital education puts teachers and students in a volatile, creative, and highly generative space where good teachers find their practice being opened up to new ways of doing things. Online film festivals, collectively written multimodal assignments, virtual walking tours, shared virtual fieldwork, and dynamic, ambient social media feeds are some examples from our own practice, and there are many others" (136–37). The projects my students completed in "Theories of Literacy" illustrate that rather than being a deficit, the online environment benefitted them in learning about the literacy theories on which the course focused. One of the threshold concepts that we discussed throughout the class was the claim that literacy is a social practice, not an innate skill that one is born with. For many students, this view of literacy as a social practice was a new way for them to conceive of literacy. Using technologies like playlists and websites to work through the inequities they discovered allowed students to comprehend at a deeper level that literacy was a social practice and that these practices have material impacts.

Inside the class environment, our discussions and projects helped them to identify the way that literacies are used to structure particular kinds of power relationships in which some have more privilege than others. Outside the class environment, the pandemic brought to the forefront of our global consciousness already existing inequities in many areas of the world. When students became

aware of these inequities through their engagements both inside and outside of class, they expressed a desire to understand more clearly how the current social practices of literacy limited certain people while privileging others. When they learned about those limits, they then increasingly wanted to participate in change-making activities. Since they were limited by the quarantine, they had to use digital technologies because they were what was available to them. In that process they learned that these technologies had real, creative and connective benefits. The online classroom and their experiences with navigating learning in that environment led them to imagine new ways of enacting change. They learned that digital spaces could be used to achieve our goals in ways that they had not seen prior to being required to participate in online learning.

### Flexible Courses Help Create Resilient Learners

Bayne et al. argue that “there are many ways to get it right online. ‘Best practice’ neglects context” (7). Instead of insisting on approaching teaching in only one way for all contexts and students, they “understand teaching, learning, and assessment as emergent, performed, through dynamic entanglements of both social and material components—people, objects, discourses, texts” (8). Since teaching is “enacted within specific networks and is situationally contingent and inherently multiple,” it is therefore important to approach teaching flexibly (9).

The pandemic required that both students and teachers be flexible. Online learning required a shift in our thinking about what “the classroom” would look like. For instructors, it required flexibility in our responses to students’ changing needs. Student-centered teaching is a frequently embraced approach to teaching, but teaching online during a pandemic encouraged us to take that pedagogical theory to the next level. When I revised the last module of the course I made designing our course a subject of discussion in the course. I opened up the process of design and asked students to become co-designers of the final module. The results of inviting students to have a central part in not only the shape of their own projects but the overall shape of the course was that students played an integral part in helping to design their educational experiences. They had a say not just through a limited set of predetermined choices that do not necessarily impact the learning outcomes, but they actually participated in defining the outcomes of the course. To open up design in this way requires a deep belief in the value of students’ skills and experiences, and the results can be very beneficial. As Bayne et al. argue, “While poorly designed online courses may create isolating, demotivating experiences for students, collaborative, community-driven courses that may include opportunities for peer working and responsive and tailored tutor interaction and feedback are also possible” (139).

The pandemic demanded that we be flexible, but the flexibility required here will be beneficial to students long term because flexibility is a core habit of mind that successful people in a myriad of fields engage in. While we made pedagogical changes because of the pandemic, what we learned about flexibility can be expanded upon and utilized in non-pandemic times as well. We can embrace the sort of flexibility that will benefit our students and make our course material relevant to their ever-changing needs in the new “normal” we construct.

### Expanded Ideas about Online Learning: Connection

Bayne et al. challenge typical conceptions about what it means to be connected, urging us to rethink our assumptions in fundamental ways. They write that

As many of our digital technologies have become smoother, more immersive, and less obtrusive, we find ourselves in a post-digital era in which we need to understand contact as something that takes place multiply; a video call is contact, and so is teacher presence on a Twitter feed; a phone call is contact and so is a shared gaming session; an asynchronous text chat is contact, and so is a co-authoring session on a shared document. These are forms that we can value on their own terms, without always needing to align them with ideals of contact dependent on proximity in space, and visibility of face. Contact works in multiple ways. Face time is overvalued. (144)

Teaching online during the pandemic—and the pandemic more broadly—taught us this lesson about the changing nature of contact and connection.

Despite the fact that the course was taught online when students had expressed a preference for learning in-person, connection-building on multiple levels was still possible—and made possible in ways that were well suited to the online environment. During the global pandemic, students had an awareness of how connected we all are, even though they were largely disconnected from in-person exchanges. While we were physically distanced and this did, to some extent, provoke a sense of alienation and isolation, perceptions of technology changed. Instead of being seen as the thing that distances us, it was seen as a way to connect. Since the gold standard of on-ground learning was simply not an option, people invested significant energy into learning how technologies could be used to connect us. As a result, they were able to find ways to use the technological affordances to creatively build connections with the course material, their peers, and communities around them.

“Connected,” thus, is beginning to be re-defined and re-experienced. After experiences with online classes during the pandemic, it is becoming more broadly accepted that being online doesn’t necessarily mean being disembodied or disconnected. As Bayne et al. point out, “the idea that embodied proximity is essential to quality education is an outdated trope based in historical and elite models of

university education in which students were inducted into scholarship by sitting at the feet of the master” (136). The pandemic has led us to explore new models for education, even for those of us who were already student-centered in our teaching. We can use online spaces to break down the boundaries between “inside” and “outside.” We saw how we can use online spaces not to distance students from their communities but to more thoroughly embed them within those communities while at the same time expanding the communities to which they have access—and want to have access to. “Connected,” then, is not necessarily about the physical. There are ways to be embodied and located online just as there are ways to be distanced and disembodied when in person.

## CONCLUSION

In her analysis of the powerful impact of technologies during the pandemic, Dana Rose Garfin acknowledges the potential dangers of using digital technologies widely, but she insists that the world has changed to the degree that we can no longer avoid their ubiquity. However, she argues that we can utilize them in beneficial ways. She writes that

society’s reliance on technology is increasing during the COVID-19 pandemic, with social and occupational changes that may persist long after the current crisis abates. Therefore, it is imperative to make mindful and intentional choices about how to leverage technology to improve our lives, reduce stress and improve mental health. (557)

Online teaching during the pandemic has taught us lessons about ways to mindfully leverage technologies in ways that not only increase students’ knowledge but also their resiliency.

The pandemic caused much disorientation in our lives. When we are disoriented, we can no longer rest in the known; instead, we have to re-orient ourselves. A state of disequilibrium, however, can be useful in that it provides an opportunity to reflect on the path we had been on and decide if we want to change the direction and/or the path we take to get to that goal. Through mandated online learning even for those reluctant to be in that environment, teaching during the pandemic gave us no choice but to reorient. It also required students to reorient. It is important to step back and consider what we learned from the disconcerting time of the pandemic and decide what course we want to take for ourselves now. I have laid out three lessons I learned from the experience of teaching online during the pandemic, and I invite you to use them as a jumping-off point to your own reflections on your thinking about what the new normal we want to create.

## NOTE

1 I have obtained Institutional Research Board approval to quote directly from students' work completed throughout the course. Per the conditions of that approval, I use pseudonyms throughout the chapter.

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# Disrupting Writing and Systemic Disruption

KATHRYN A. BROYLES

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If university faculty are to best enable and support student growth (while navigating online administrative choices that impinge on academic freedom), at every level and in every discipline we must disrupt the kind of encroaching uncritical standardization of digital pedagogy and assessment that privileges market forces and IT preferences. Faculty recently thrust into the online environment by the COVID-19 pandemic should recognize that too easily embracing educational technology (ed-tech) for desperately needed convenience can actually impinge on freedom of praxis and may subject them to unprecedented classroom surveillance. Boyd in responding to Feenberg's *Critical Theory of Technology* notes, "online education is not simply another tool for the promotion of learning, but rather an all-encompassing environment managing and controlling access to information, structuring relationships, and redefining individual identities" (171). Indeed, online learning seeks to democratize access for students, a goal shared by publicly funded institutions, and lauded by most faculty, and it often succeeds. Yet it does so while simultaneously enacting education as primarily (and almost exclusively) transactional. In response to this commodification of both space and purpose, while online faculty of all disciplines must embrace the essential structures of the Learning Management System (LMS), they must also foster students' critiques of those structures and render visible implicit value assumptions that decenter human complexity even while those structures purport to be student-centered. Faculty—especially composition faculty whose institutional location tends to put

them repeatedly in contact with the most students and at the earliest point in their academic sojourn—need to recognize that all aspects of the structure and flow of the cyberspace classroom are controlled by the technical architecture of the space and by the institutional and corporate power brokers who frame the functionality of the campus LMS. Curriculum and subsequently pedagogical choices are frequently made to “fit” that functionality of the space. This can be generative and inspire innovation, but it can also be limiting and even prevent full expression of fundamental pedagogical commitments within a discipline. Assessment, not just of students, but of faculty, becomes subject to and shaped by what can be streamlined and counted about performance and output—what Melgaco and Lyon call “the Quantified Scholar” (Tanczer et al. 21).

Backdoor LMS surveillance differs drastically from traditional (and relational) observations of faculty and student performance. In the LMS “measures of accountability” superimpose systemic “best practices” able to generate reportable metrics regardless of faculty strengths, teaching philosophies, or even student needs. Smart campuses and classrooms as well as fully online spaces are designed, by default, to permit “the monitoring of both students and staff” (Tancer et al. 3). Presence, activity, and engagement can all be tracked and so are assumed to be indicative of productivity and success—because such tracking generates numerical data. The illusion is that more student needs are met and student success and satisfaction guaranteed, and that metrics demonstrate this; the truth is that students are helped (or not) helped depending on whether they land in the right classroom with the right teacher, who, despite challenges and restrictions of best practices dictated by metrics, engages professionally as an educator and rhetorician, with competence, disciplinary expertise, a modicum of technical know-how and with genuine affection for learners. The rush to position online learning as the answer to all education in the time of COVID-19 and confusing anything happening in a virtual space as “online learning” only exacerbates these issues.

## TEACHING COMPOSITION ONLINE

Teaching writing in a virtual classroom requires pedagogy different than the traditional classroom. Works by many, including Harasim, Selfe, as well as Pallof and Pratt, make abundantly clear that the digital space is not parallel to the face-to-face campus (though it may share a business address) and for learning to move forward, both faculty and students must engage pedagogical and curricular approaches that differ from traditional models. But are IT experts and ed-tech firms determining those approaches, or are faculty? And how is writing framed and impacted? Writing is a skill central to online spaces, even privileged, despite the digital environment. Multimodal modes of composition and communication,

respected as impactful products of meaningful pedagogical interactions, are by no means a primary, or widely accepted avenue of engagement in many writing classrooms, even digital ones. Interestingly, for programs that are all online, hence global, and so must value asynchronous communication, text is fundamental, even more fundamental than for a brick-and-mortar campus classroom—conversations in forums, for example, move beyond extended conversations, to become critical shared texts. Impromptu conversations with faculty take the form of emailed correspondence subject to institutional review of “presence.” Privileging text (out of necessity), in a space where responding to and guiding writing cannot be given the attention such work deserves, jeopardizes both student and faculty success. If online teaching priorities and three-to-five day grading deadlines are determined a priori with no regard for disciplinary content, level of instruction, faculty load, nor student abilities or needs, institutions work at cross-purposes to the pedagogue interested in fostering good writing both inside and outside the classroom—and at all levels. Good teaching and good writing happen. Faculty and students do find ways to thrive. But truth telling about the challenges and the encroachment on “best practices” as defined by ed-tech vs. by professional organizations and current disciplinary scholarship cannot be ignored. Such challenges are further complicated when one grapples with the assumption that most students who obtain a college-level education learn to write, but struggle. In reality half of students report having never attempted to write a paper of more than 20 pages in any course, even advanced level courses (Holzweiss et al. 315). While these are likely not the students who arrive eager to pursue the MA in English or in Rhetoric and Composition, this sobering reality matters to programs attracting cross-disciplinary scholars and should be understood to indicate that “a majority of graduate students [do not have] significant writing experience when starting their advanced degree programs” (315). Their challenges, then, are compounded when faculty teaching online do not have the temporal or academic freedom to meet students where they are because those same instructors are pressed by countable “best practices” related to faculty response rate to students vs. primarily focused on bringing them to the level they need to be, whether graduate or undergraduate. Indeed conscientious faculty responding to and evaluating writing as a central professional focus and disciplinary endeavor can find themselves facing serious emotional burdens. Their intent may be to encourage the voices of emerging writers and to challenge budding scholars. Yet, they cannot perform to the best of their own abilities as pedagogues and mentors when they neither have the freedom to organize their own work, nor are given time to respond meaningfully to course assignments. When systemic measured behaviors by which faculty are evaluated do NOT account for the graduate student [and even undergraduate] need for inculcation into “a community of practice” nor make time for real

relationships with educators, and for “thoughtful evaluation on how [students] can improve,” then both student and faculty performance and well-being suffer (317).

Danielewicz and Elbow, in their 2009 article titled “A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching,” suggest that contracts based on critical pedagogy ought to become more widely used in college writing classes, shifting the focus away from grades and onto writing and the processes that lead to good writing. Students and faculty operate with a contract that lists those activities known by faculty to lead to at least B-level work if engaged in with diligence, over the course of an academic term. Both students and faculty can then turn their attention away from the transactional stress of “earning” and “awarding” grades, and instead focus on stretching as writers, and pushing towards excellence without risk of experimentation meaning failure in the classroom. Managing one’s image, identity, and personal affect, a task necessary in every classroom, but additionally vital and complicated in online spaces, becomes doubly crucial in Humanities and Social Science courses that not infrequently require one to share one’s own experiences, opinions, cultural contexts, etc. Recognizing this task as taking an emotional toll can keep the learning processes and growth in writing and owning one’s own voice as a budding scholar moving forward, facilitated by the learner/mentor connection. This kind of invested relationship is just the one pointed to by Holzweiss et al. as central to students’ growth. In contrast, Tannehill et al., in their article examining the policies and practices of several online institutions, ask as a final discussion topic, “How can online courses and faculty meet student expectations?” They do so with no critical unpacking of the term “expectations” and conflate ideas, assuming that “student expectations” automatically equal best practices. With this assumption at the fore, their odd abhorrence of faculty freedom becomes not reasonable, but understandable. They seem to shudder as they note “if there is little to no standardization or requirements [meant to standardize behavior], the quality of a course and its delivery are left completely in the hands of each faculty member” (23). A faculty member should be free to center student narrative rather than have courses and their own activities within those courses shaped by data points and policies enabling easier IT management and metrics reporting. Innovative, engaged faculty members who play to their own strengths and to the needs of their students should be the kind of teacher-scholars that universities support.

### Praxis and Sustainability

Joel Salatin, the self-styled “lunatic farmer” of the highly successful family-run organic Polyface Farm, a leader in sustainable, biodynamic farming practices, notes that while industrial farming strips both the land of nutrients and farmers of their freedom (from debt, from health unimpacted by chemicals, and from

restriction of monopoly seed culture), following an animal's "true nature" will lead a farmer to farming practices that transform the land and are humane to the animal—enabling both to thrive. Respecting the "pigness of pigs," argues Salatin, improves every step of the chain of life impacted by sustainable farming practices. Educators are by no means "farming" individuals like some dystopian nightmare, when we consider the present state of education, and in particular online learning, but we delude ourselves if we uncritically accept the industrialization of education—and the consolidation of ed-tech by corporations—without insisting its use and application be governed by what leads to human thriving, to genuine lifelong learning and competence, and not implemented at the expense of individual rights or freedoms or in the name of arbitrary efficacy and learning outcomes derived from systems of surveillance.

First, it is important to understand that online learning is not unusual, nor just a temporary solution to COVID-19 challenges, but a permanent and ever-growing part of the educational landscape, particularly at the university level. Citing statistics from Allen and Seaman's 2014 report on online learning, Holzeiss et al. note that at least 66 % of all US institutions include online learning as part of their long-term strategy and this statistic, of course, predates the COVID-19 pandemic and the digital shifts it has precipitated and which continue to unfold. In their article, "Administrative or Faculty Control of Online Course Development," Tannehill et al. note the pre-pandemic figures of Clinefelter and Aslanian, who estimated that by 2016, more than 5 million students were projected to attend online degree programs. This prediction bears out as according to the National Center of Educational Statistics, "In fall 2018, there were 6,932,074 students enrolled in any distance education courses at degree-granting postsecondary institutions" (NCES Fast Facts) and in 2019, based on a survey of 5,961 institutions nation-wide, the percent of students enrolled in distance education courses in (any) postsecondary institutions in the fall was 36.6 % of all students enrolled in any program (NCES Trend Generator). Indeed, according to their May 2021 figures as published publicly, just five fully accredited, 100 % online university programs (American Public University System, Western Governors University, Arizona State University, Liberty University, and Southern New Hampshire University), collectively account for more than half a million active students.

Data reports not governed by the fundamental idea that humans are not machines and not the sum of their actions, and that technology should serve (not dictate) human endeavor, must be at the heart of every systemic implementation of technology, in all settings, but especially in educational and development contexts. And for learners to thrive, their partners in learning—educators—must also thrive. It's no accident that without difficulty nearly everyone can recount at least one story of a teacher or mentor who impacted their lives. Why? Because

real human connection, however mediated the engagement, *matters*. If we haven't learned anything else this pandemic year, we've learned that. It's not the topic of study, the age of the student or the technical acumen of the educator that leads to the story; it is the individuals in relationship. The challenge, the understanding, or the empathy of the context forever impacts the life of a learner.

According to Zuboff, “surveillance capitalism is the precise opposite of the trust-based relationships” academe needs to thrive and that while “doctors, attorneys, and other trusted professionals are held to account by mutual dependencies and reciprocities overlain by the force of professional sanction and public law,” companies like Google clearly adhere to no similar scruples (83). The tension here between such practices of “surveillance” and privacy guaranteed by laws is that academics sit squarely between them—the professionals and the tech conglomerate. When institutions engage work that involves student information, they are bound by FERPA which they take very seriously. However, the ways in which they invade student space, track student and faculty behaviors, and inculcate ed-tech which may not be organized around the assumptions FERPA makes about the integrity of the individual persona, or which do not respect the faculty member's own value system, allow institutions to act in a manner incongruent with their purposes as institutions of higher learning. Using student information in ways students are unaware of precludes students having freedom they imagine they have, or makes a charade of privacy they imagine they operate with behind passwords. Faculty and students are still commodified, not just as “users” engaging in a “transaction” but as “products” the organization can tout in terms of statistics ranges, improvements, rates, etc.

### Praxis, Surveillance, and Subversion

The steps towards surveillance are not new. They can be understood as emerging out of the increasing industrialization of higher education, and the normalizing of intrusive tech via digitization of personal spaces. As Ostenson et al. note in 2017, “[as] university management has become more business oriented, institutions have focused more on making money and less on education” (10). Online learning still has its detractors for this very reason—human connection is mediated in ways faculty can't pin down but often distrust. If the LMS mediates the interactions between pupil and teacher, and dictates functions and methods of engagement, many instructors instinctively resist its widespread implementation as exploitative and dehumanizing. Wrongly, however, they assume it is the medium at issue, somehow forgetting that the skilled pedagogue, and rhetorician, fully invested in pupils and their thriving, has operated successfully in nearly every medium through the ages, from wax, to papyrus to slate to paper and so on. Research demonstrates online learning (when used as a medium that centers upon

relationship and the learner) continues to successfully support meaningful growth and discovery. What is at issue, however, and much more insidious is that because oversight of the pedagogue (and the student) can be done covertly and the current state of data collection allows for creating endless analysis of data—institutional decision-makers are no longer accountable to the collective human endeavor, but to a quickly morphing IT landscape that privileges access and visual “dashboard” illustrations of “perceived value” in points of data—not because the data demonstrably improves (or represents) improvement of student growth and understanding (or even retention, according to Barber et al.), but because it represents a slant on countable pedagogical activity.

This kind of skewed approach to professional education and professional faculty evaluation results in what amounts to maniacal and unproductive forms of high stakes, *hoop jumpin’* teaching—and enforces the same kinds of discriminatory practices and pervasive “othering” that all blanket systems of high stakes testing result in when conducted not for professional certifications, but for measures leading to financial and political decision-making. So, how to take a step back and reframe faculty evaluation in the online learning spaces? How might this make us better, more critical consumers of ed-tech as teachers of writing? And, finally, how might doing this help us help our students? This is a topic fraught with political and disciplinary issues beyond the scope of this chapter. But a question that can be addressed here is what might faculty committees and administrative and institutional decision-makers avoid doing to embed industrialized, digitized and dehumanizing practices into the DNA of not only fully online institutions of higher learning, but of ever-burgeoning online programs at all institutions (set only to grow according to current trends)? And how might they do so in ways that enable faculty to thrive, and such that technology is the servant and the result is meaningful relationship and engagement between pedagogue and pupil such that pupils thrive too?

Cox et al., in their essay “Working with Missing Data in Higher Education Research: A Primer and Real-World Example” from a 2017 edition of *The Journal of Higher Education*, reported that they were “struck by the dearth of empirical evidence supporting the claim that assessment practices contribute to positive student outcomes in higher ed” despite their finding no “large-scale analyses” on data-driven decision making (DDDM) (837). Yet more striking “even when [they] artificially maximized the opportunity for assessment and the DDDM policy scales to generate even spurious findings of statistical significance, the results seemed to indicate that these policies have little to no positive connection with student experiences and outcomes” (851). What they are referring to relates to institutions who collect “assessment” data on student behaviors and engagement and who put into place institution-wide policies that “might be leveraged to increase college student engagement” (840). Cox’s team was particularly

interested in first year students, but that they ended up with “statistically significant coefficients in only 2 of the 45 analysis [conducted]—and one of those coefficients was negative” (851). This signals that broader concern ought to be expressed. Monitoring the human machine via covert surveillance and educational algorithmic processes does not lead to the “student success” administrators claim to achieve—not for the lifelong learner, and apparently, not for the student in the early processes of learning within an institution of higher learning either. Institutions not vital and thriving, part of a humane organism of healthy and engaged faculty and mentors but rather organized as servants to the assessment machine, clearly risk failing their students.

### Towards Generative Rigor and Away from Digitization as Assessment

Institutions willing to negotiate the careful balance between thriving and tech savvy, who make that technology servant to their values and allow room for the human activity they foster, will be building systems that mean institutional success in the long-term. Even as student enrollment declines and/or diversifies, and as technical certificates and vocational training return as vital avenues of economic and personal growth, the roles that universities play in crucial cultural formation and systemic moral endeavor will remain. Those institutions willing to resist the international commerce model for tech company growth and Wall Street, for the short term, are likely to find themselves a new kind of educational Warren Buffet (acknowledging this is a very imperfect reach, but an important idea)—quietly and consistently exercising common sense and not just following trends, and even doing what may to the wider market seem counter intuitive, in order to reach the long-term gain. When universities organize for long-term gain and that long-term gain is human thriving, real human connectedness, freedom of ideas and expression, innovation and personal growth, anything is possible. The movement and direction of public opinion globally is against the monster corporation that would devour the planet. The wise institution will move towards sustainable models not just in the energy sector and in business and production, but by returning to educational models that privilege personal connection, individual accountability, individual innovation, and space to grow.

As highlighted earlier, faculty must recognize that all aspects of the structure and flow of the cyberspace classroom are controlled by the technical architecture of the space and by the institutional and corporate power brokers who frame the functionality of the campus LMS. The critical consideration they reflexively give third party apps before adding them to their personal mobile phones, must be carried over to their consideration of ed-tech they adopt in the classroom—or allow their institutions to contract with and implement. To center business (at the expense of authentic education and genuine, un-coerced interaction between



online faculty and students) by adopting surveillance models uncritically serves no one. It is questionable whether such policies are able to meaningfully “measure” outcomes that lead to real-life success. Serious consideration should be given as to whether such policies might also be contributing to the present challenge of shrinking enrollments. Students no longer need degrees for the tech world in the way they once did, but they still crave expanded understanding of their realities and harbor desires for improving their standard of living as well as that of those for whom they care. That “standard” is not always about income, but also includes a broadened understanding of an ever-shrinking globe and their place within it. Barber et al. put forward the use of Digital Moments (DM), “a robust and valid method of creating meaningful communities through recording digital stories that emerge through these authentic contexts,” as an effective “alternative form of data representation and storytelling” that enables qualitative research in the online environment (60). Perhaps rather than imagining this collaborative model for problem-based learning as exclusively effective for students as they build knowledge with peers, might it offer a decentralized and sustainable means of professional and institutional reflection? Barber et al. suggest:

Within the digital world we have a myriad of opportunities to invite students to develop [problem-solving] skills, if the instructor has the courage and tenacity to relinquish some authority, and level the playing field. Expertise no longer resides in one individual in a professional learning community, and so the roles of teacher and learner meld. (60)

This kind of redistribution of power has long been the norm for writing faculty, often the champions of student-centered learning and enabling multiple literacies and multiple oralities on the traditional campus. But in the context of this chapter and of the pressing need to shift to sustainable online learning communities away from centralized surveillance culture, the DM model reveals a multimodal option for faculty review that actually harbors the potential to improve “real” student outcomes. Often, this occurs through the use of the individual’s “Digital Moments,” moments collected to tell the story of learning facilitated by virtual collaboration in the online campus—even with the strictures of the LMS.

## CONCLUSION

I love gardening. Not much makes me happier than reading or dancing. I cannot do math in my head. I can balance a checkbook and understand the principle of compound interest, but I can’t write code. I can add memory to my laptop but am mystified by networking tech. I lived in 14 houses before I was 14 and have moved as an independent adult at least 8 times. I can carry a tune only if I stand next to

someone who can carry the tune without me, and I have a long-standing love/hate relationship with milk.

This is barely a glimpse of who I am and I say all this just to note that there is much unique that faculty bring to the table in every course, and in every student encounter that can't be measured by any means. And these complicating and enriching factors benefit students even before taking account of any graduate education or teaching and scholarship experiences that inform presence and decision-making in every element of the classroom. This is true of all faculty—they do not have PhDs or other graduate qualifications by accident, nor are they unidimensional individuals. Neither are students. We know this to be true. In my online world I've had active-duty students submitting work from caves in Afghanistan, planning presentations meant to mitigate suicide rates among their troops, and deploying such material remotely. I've had a professional basketball player laying down the framework for a nation-wide non-profit youth program as a course project, and supported more than a few new moms a long way from home, making sacrificial choices early in their lives in order to set up their growing families for success in the future. To assume that there is a “best practices” mono-culture for online courses within which such complex individuals have their educational, emotional, and personal needs met in the way that a liberal education has offered for generations, is naive at best, self-defeating in the interim, and in many ways discriminatory and harmful.

Students seeking the opportunity for quality education who might not otherwise have access financially, or geographically, or due to sociological or familial concerns, are at once given that access by online classrooms, but then denied the rich potential of that access. They cannot benefit from rich engagement with university faculty and resources when universities move to policies and evaluative mechanisms tightly bound by corporate structures and decision-making (ones that privilege ease of data collection and IT control rather than truly educational best practices) and when efficiency rather than human thriving is assumed to lead to success and sustainability.

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# Presence as Participation: Reflections on COVID-19's Impact on a Graduate Seminar at an Urban Research University

MICHAEL HARKER, KEATON LAMLE, AND RACHEL WOODS

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This essay weaves together the stories of a tenured professor, doctoral student, and a new Master's student in her first semester teaching first-year writing at an urban research university. From three distinct perspectives, it recounts how Covid-19's emergence as a public health emergency instantly transformed the authors' graduate-level writing seminar from a traditional inquiry-based exploration of Enlightenment-era rhetoric to an entirely online, asynchronous, and primarily heuristic-based pedagogical experience. First, Rachel Woods, Master's student, discusses how the disruption in classroom learning in Spring 2020 both challenged and reinforced her skepticism towards simplistic policies equating attendance with participation. She also describes the renewed appreciation she discovered for in-person Socratic dialogue once web-based textual exchange replaced embodied classroom discussion as the seminar's dominant form of communication. Next, Keaton Lamle, PhD student, recounts his experience transitioning from the participation patterns he had developed for the in-person Enlightenment seminar to the guessing game of engaging the same course in a new modality. He explains how this process affected his conceptions of participation on both sides of the gradebook as he repeated in the role of instructor the very same assessment behaviors that confounded him as a student. Finally, Michael Harker, associate professor of English, relates challenges and questions he faced as instructor of record for Rachel and Keaton's graduate seminar. He describes how a lack of experience with teaching online and ambivalence about

online learning more generally led him to make a particularly revealing pedagogical misstep. At stake in these three stories is an understanding of the ways professional identities, university expectations, and pedagogical context inform how instructors and students determine what will count as evidence of effective participation.

## INVESTIGATING PARTICIPATION

Before we proceed to the individual narratives, we briefly investigate contemporary scholarship on participation, paying particular attention to gaps in scholarly understandings and characterizations of participation. Ranking high on the list of understudied and misunderstood topics of inquiry in higher education is the role of student participation in the classroom. Despite a lack of clarity or consensus about what counts as evidence of outstanding, excellent, average, or poor participation, attempts to evaluate and meaningfully integrate student participation remain ubiquitous, especially as a requirement in course policies and syllabi. Part of the confusion surrounding participation, it seems, stems from not having a shared language to identify with precision its characteristics, behaviors, and ends. Some educators regard participation as a pedagogical tool to promote various types of engagement. From “encouraging dialogue among and between students” to “controlling what’s happening in class,” participation often functions as a pedagogical panacea (Weimer). Similar to so many other pedagogical strategies, participation—as both learning outcome and pedagogical tool—is overburdened by exaggerated expectations, varied definitions, and often unreliable methods of assessment.

Some of the most widely read scholarship of teaching of learning (SoTL) confirms both universal expectation and uncertainty when it comes to investigating and evaluating student participation. James Lang’s popular *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* offers only a few references to participation. “Whatever change you are hoping to make to your teaching,” Lang asserts, “from livening up your lectures or increasing participation in your discussions to running better group work sessions ... you can still reach your objective by making those changes one small (teaching) step at a time” (241). Advancing a binaristic characterization of participation, Lang notes, “Self-explaining is a constructive activity requiring students to actively engage in their learning process. Active participation is better than passive participation for learning” (Chiu and Chi 92). Characterizing participation in binaristic terms—as either something students do or do not do—is a common tendency, one that points to educators’ rigid understanding of participation in pedagogical environments.

We find similar tendencies in Linder and Hayes' collection, *High-Impact Practices in Online Education: Research and Best Practices*. With the goal of "leveraging and expanding HIPs for distance-learning environments," the collection contains 23 references to participation. Most references rely on vague conceptions of participation and equate it with a host of behaviors generally associated with student engagement (Linder and Hayes 3, 1). One study, however, considers how participation is impacted by online learning specifically, noting important differences between synchronous and asynchronous participation in online learning environments (Robertson and Riggs). "Today's online learning environments," the authors write, "are constructed using many different technologies, multimedia components, and design features ... they fall into two basic design categories: those that require synchronous participation and those that do not" (72).

Although the authors acknowledge that digital modes of learning offer various ways to engage students and deliver content and assignments, again we find the tendency to express participation in either/or terms. By going beyond these rigid understandings of participation we recognize the diverse aptitudes and varied expertise required by both instructors and students to initiate meaningful participation, especially in online learning environments. We also hedge against the common tendency to invite student participation based on an internal, unspoken set of criteria. Kelly Bradbury and Paul Muhlhauser call this "Goldiloxxing" participation, or the act of aspiring to get participation "just right" based on unspoken assumptions about how participation looks, feels, and sounds. Doing so, in our current pedagogical and technological moment, raises tough questions: To what extent does Goldiloxxing participation restrict our understanding of digital behaviors and expertise that could provide more reliable evidence of participation? In what ways do we, as instructors, pass on to our students binaristic attitudes and understandings of participation? What lessons might be learned about participation when we reflect on the pedagogical dislocations brought about by COVID-19?

Genevieve Critel's "Mapping Student Participation in the College-Level Writing Classroom" offers a language, theoretical framework, and data to engage with these questions in nuanced and meaningful ways. Combining findings from a national survey of educators and an archival investigation of syllabi at a research-intensive university from 1959–2000, Critel's study is among the first to offer a data-driven and systematic examination of both instructors' definitions of participation as well as trends in postsecondary treatments of participation in scholarship and syllabi. Confirming participation's prevalence as an assessed category she reports that 95 % of instructors surveyed reported sometimes or always assessing participation, noting that participation is "a nearly universal expectation in the college-level writing classroom as well as many other classrooms across the disciplines" (Critel).

Critel’s investigation of participation reveals commonplaces, or what she describes as “a common site of invention in the conversation about student participation in the writing classroom” (Critel). In her view, manifestations of participation as learning outcome and/or pedagogical tool may be characterized in four ways: community, assessment, embodiment, and technology. Although each commonplace corresponds with distinct practices, expectations, and underlying logics related to institutional pressures—Critel reports that 12 out of 148 respondents indicate that their institutions require them to assess participation—they have one thing in common. Participatory requirements reflect pedagogical goals that emphasize “the social aspects” of teaching. This classroom context is informed by unspoken assumptions about power dynamics between instructors and students as well as the underlying value systems that shape those relationships.

We do not have space in this chapter to discuss Critel’s entire body of research on participation or the important work inspired by it like *The Rhetoric of Participation: Interrogating Commonplaces in and Beyond the Classroom*. However, when relevant and/or helpful, the following reflections establish connections with commonplaces of participation and other theories of learning. We conclude our reflections about teaching and learning during the earliest stages of the pandemic with takeaways and lessons for the pedagogical future. These are meant to function as lessons and starting points for further research on new commonplaces of participation that will shape what counts as learning in our new virtual world.

### **“THERE’S A LOT TO BE SAID FOR JUST SHOWING UP.”**

Rachel, Master’s Student, Enlightenment Rhetoric Spring, 2020

One of the most important parts of learning to me is the interaction between the class and the instructor. It is about more than a participation grade; talking and sharing ideas allows me to better understand the material. Opportunities to subtly adjust my understanding of a text happen in real-time, embodied discussion in ways that online platforms do not yet allow. Despite being generally reserved, I rely on Socratic seminar style communication in a traditional classroom academic setting in order to guide my understanding of a topic. This vital part of learning was taken away in March as the pandemic forced us to switch to strictly online classrooms. Since most professors were not prepared to teach online, many of us, both students and instructors, struggled with the transition and could not properly adapt lessons to the new format.

As a student, I found it difficult to focus on schoolwork or feel connected to it when working from the confines of home. Being restricted to an apartment with me, myself, and I for company, I felt like we were not a community but



separate people occasionally checking in or collaborating with each other. I especially struggled in Dr. Harker's class when it switched to the online format. The class was heavy in rhetorical theory and I had heretofore relied on our Socratic seminar sessions to understand the materials, so my engagement almost entirely disappeared once we transferred those interactions to online discussion boards. Critel identified "community" and "embodiment" as two of the commonplaces that emerged in her study of participation requirements, and having these two elements of participation suddenly removed from the equation (despite everybody's best attempts to compensate) clarified something I had long suspected. An important, "invisible" transfer happens beneath the observable surface of the behaviors that instructors often assess. As Keaton argues below, this process might be termed something like "Resonance," or "Dialogue," and it could be defined as those hidden processes of engagement that instructors are probably seeking to encourage when they measure metrics like "attendance," substituting a potentially messy phenomenon with something that can be easily empirically measured.

In our case, for instance, the idea itself of online discussion boards was a sensible substitute for our resonant class collaborations, but the results were not the same in practice. In Critel's terms, it was almost like we were all trying to substitute "technology" to make up for our lack of "community" and "embodiment," with one commonplace failing to act as a sufficient proxy for the other two. I would check in and complete the necessary tasks, and that was the extent of my participation. Dr. Harker did not require class Zoom meetings—which I was thankful for at the time because I was struggling with the transition and did not feel prepared to meet every week, since my ability to maintain the same work schedule had been dramatically affected by the experience of isolation, leading me to work in short spurts of frantic activity. And yet, despite my relief, I now realize I felt even more disconnected and alone in my studies because we did not meet. I had never taken an online class before so this was a new and uncomfortable experience. I was not prepared for the challenges of online learning and did not feel entirely supported by the school, despite my instructors' best efforts to help us students. But I appreciated that Dr. Harker scheduled individual meetings to check on our progress in the course. This interaction brought me back to the present and allowed me to temporarily re-engage with the class.

I experienced the other side of the coin when I became an instructor in Fall of 2020. Initially, I felt as if I had a leg up after spending 15+ years as a student, but I was woefully unprepared for the demand of navigating participation as a teacher. Students were emailing me twenty-four hours a day asking for extensions on essays, confiding personal issues, or wanting clarification on various assignments. I let these demands take over my life as I felt obligated to help them no matter the time or what I was doing; "we're in the middle of a pandemic," I would say to justify my actions as accommodating rather than excessive. It turned out

that defining and maintaining the commonplace of “community” for dozens of first-year learners can be very labor-intensive. I became like a building superintendent, on-call for my students 24/7. In addition to the constant communication, I began to seek validation that I was performing at the highest level and giving the best service. It was as if I was waiting to see if my students were grading me on mere presence or active participation. As Critel cites from Croxall and Cordell, “the ways teachers assess and define participation are wrapped up in assumptions not always visible or knowable to students.” In my case, these roles were reversed. Even as an instructor, I still found myself guessing as to how much would be “good enough.” In this context, Critel’s commonplaces ceased to feel like a helpful delineation of the ways a hypothetical instructor might define and assess participation and began to seem more like a taxonomy of all the ways I might fail my students. For me, this experience highlighted our need to discover new commonplaces and investigate the gaps between those exterior behaviors we assess and the interior cognitive processes we actually hope to encourage.

Through my experiences both online and in the classroom during COVID, I discovered that there is a lot to be said for just showing up. Embodied listening in a real place alongside other people creates a kind of resonance we simply have not yet been able to replicate through screens. The act of attending a class still offers the chance to engage students in a common community and impact their learning. As students, I feel that we feed off of each other and that physically being in the same space influences how we retain the material. Critel describes this as the social nature of participation and it requires multiple layers of action (listening, attendance, etc.) to be a participant. In online classrooms, it is easy to disengage and play on the internet or watch TV because there is no accountability—I reluctantly admit that I have spent a few class sessions toggling between Tik Tok and the lecture. When I was surrounded by other students and the instructor in a face-to-face class, on the other hand, it forced a certain level of engagement and connection that may be lost in the webcam. I had to listen to classmates ask questions, feel the eyes of the instructor as they spoke to the group, and even collaborate on teacher-assigned tasks.

That said, I have always felt that too much value has been assigned to mere presence. I frequently faced the problem of instructors enforcing strict attendance requirements and deducting from my grade if I missed class during my undergraduate education. I saw it as an unnecessary pressure being placed on students to sublimate their personal needs for the sake of a grade. This bias carried over to my own classroom as I gave my students the freedom of not counting presence towards their final grades in the classes I taught during the autumn of 2020. My strategy had questionable success as I noticed my students naturally divided themselves based on participation. The “Frequent Flyers” (as I called them) were not always vocal during class sessions, but showed the most engagement

in class assignments, communication, and submitting work above and beyond the required exercises. “Drop-Ins” were wild cards whose occasional presence did allow them to get updates on assignments or extra credit, but this group usually asked me frustrating questions because of their sporadic presence. I cannot speak much for the “Ghosts” (or no-shows) as they became faceless names in the gradebook who occasionally submitted assignments based on circumstances I cannot begin to guess.

Did the mere act of attending my classes help with their overall participation and resulting grade in the course? The best I can say is a tentative, “maybe.” Will I continue to use the no-attendance policy in my class? Most likely. While I cannot speak as to the exact weight that should be placed on mere presence versus deeper forms of participation in my classroom (my own form of Goldiloxxing), I believe that students should choose how they engage in the course without a direct threat of failure due to a lack of presence. I find myself living in the tension brought about by the fact that I know how much I benefit from the real-time dialectic of an embodied discussion, while also resenting the Draconian implications of most attendance policies.

During the pandemic, my viewpoint shifted as I began to appreciate the importance of presence and attendance in traditional face-to-face academic settings. After experiencing the differences between in-person and online classrooms and reflecting upon my experiences, I still affirm that participation is not the same as attendance. Classroom attendance policies do not necessarily encourage participation, but simply place a warm body in a seat. Substantive engagement and active listening (my own hallmarks of what “participation” should actually signify) are what we supposedly are aiming for by encouraging folks to attend, and by ceasing to conflate these tasks with the mere act of showing up, we can begin a conversation concerning what student participation actually is and how we, as instructors, can channel a more nuanced understanding into classrooms.

**“WHEN I COULDN’T SEE THEM, IT WAS AS IF THEY DIDN’T EXIST.”**

Keaton, Doctoral Student, Enlightenment Rhetoric, Spring 2020

I often think about the idea of “Terrible Freedom”—the notion that as much as we agitate for total autonomy in theory, we like being told what to do in practice. When designing courses, for instance, I typically focus on ways to minimize the confusion I felt as an online learner in the early 2010s, seeking to avoid the “I-can’t-tell-if-I’m-doing-enough” despair of unclear online work. In ideal cases, a lack of direction may have spurred me into taking more ownership of my

learning—if “participation” required me to guess the precise types and amounts of effort a particular instructor was asking for, I decided to play it safe and do *everything*, working out my academic salvation with fear and trembling. In other cases, the lack of clarity as to just what was being assessed (and how) prompted me to, as Rachel describes above, merely tick off to-do items with as little engagement as possible.

These were the dilemmas on my mind as an instructor and learner in February 2020 when Dr. Michael Harker informed our Enlightenment Rhetoric seminar that he was anticipating disruption once COVID-19 landed stateside. A bit of context: I am a lecturer at a large, public university, and a doctoral student at a different large, public university. This was my second semester in the PhD program, and my first teaching *exclusively* online (I’ve taught at least one class online each semester since 2017). Though Harker’s seminar was shaping up to be one of my favorite classes, the massive transition online in March of 2020 still had a destabilizing effect on how I approached the course. That period six to ten weeks into a semester usually coincides with me “getting my sealegs,” by which I mean the spot on the schedule when I finally feel confident that I’ve mentally aligned my own definitions of participation for the course with what the instructor expects and, more importantly, actually assesses. The sudden shift online required a second such process of trial and error, effectively extending my “adjustment period” (which Bradbury and Mulhauser might call a form of Goldiloxing) through the end of the term.

I find myself smiling as I review emails from the onset of North America’s COVID-19 experience describing “a brief, two-week” intrusion of remote learning into our normal procedures. Likewise, my incredibly specific memories of the enlightenment rhetoric course that met in person through February are replaced by vague inklings about how we coped on a WordPress platform during March and April. During that time, the exhausted student half of my brain sometimes wished mere presence could count as participation. I felt as if I should be rewarded for simply continuing to digitally “show up” amidst so much chaos. Consequently, as an instructor I fretted over what constituted “participation” while grading and worried about penalizing learners for IT problems when my software said they had not watched lecture videos. There was a tension emerging from my constant switching of roles: my experience as an instructor led me to appreciate the fact that these digital learning platforms encouraged instructors to quantify “engagement” with great specificity, but my experience as a student informed me that the precision they allowed might feel oppressive to those on the other side of the platform. The seminar with Dr. Harker provided me with a positive example of what resistance to this kind of quantification might look like and yet, teaching a sophomore literature survey with 90 socially-distancing students, I found myself leaning *heavily* on digital metrics to track specific participation. If the commonplace

Critel termed “technology” were going to have to facilitate or replace every other commonplace of participation, then I would wring every ounce of usefulness out of this tech to make sure it did the best possible job.

It was, for instance, tempting to adjust a student’s participation grade based upon whether or not our site’s surveillance tools indicated that they had visited the page containing the day’s lecture videos, or to dock a few points from those who never accessed the pdfs for our assigned readings. While these “unfinished” course modules appeared on my end as cut and dry cases of lackluster participation, I was continually confounded by learners who convincingly demonstrated that they had simply found a way to view my embedded lecture video in its original archived form on the university’s digital media server (which explained why I had no record of them visiting the specific video page I’d set up to host the video in our work module), or were reading a physical copy of the story I had uploaded (I stopped short of having them send me a picture containing the physical text, their face, and the day’s newspaper). The point is, I slowly learned that I wasn’t merely imposing some especially specific notion of what the technology commonplace of participation looked like; I had not even considered the fact that the tools that allowed me to see what each student actually did once they logged into our platform did not account for a fairly standard degree of diversity in the ways that students choose to engage course materials. I was, in other words, the very thing I feared as a learner—an instructor who had not clearly communicated my expectations, but instead blindly trusted an algorithm that didn’t recognize many of the behaviors I myself considered “engagement.” No wonder certain students saw their “participation” grades and scratched their heads. I remain thankful for their patience as I attempted to walk back my binary conception of participation in favor of a more nuanced, negotiated definition of what would be assessed throughout COVID. If we were going to Goldiloxx participation on the fly, at least we might be able to do it cooperatively and transparently.

Complicating this balancing act was the fact that many of the terms we all adopted to describe participation in response to “the new virtual world” were fuzzily defined, or were actually having their meanings socially negotiated in real time during the crisis, meaning that there was often space between sign and signified for every party involved when we conversed about what counts as participation. Students became responsible for predicting the strictures of each course they occupied. Instructors were squeezed by the twin pressures of maintaining order and performing empathy. Misunderstandings often won the day.

Though little technically changed as far as our definitions of participation in the Enlightenment seminar were concerned, the assessment procedures for mundane aspects of the course ceased to feel like the “negotiations” we had settled earlier in the semester and began to seem more like an exercise in saving money at an indeterminate rate in order to purchase a product whose cost would remain

unclear until the bill was already paid. How much had I “earned” with my daily check-ins, weekly emails, and attention to the syllabus schedule? I never could tell, though I was in conversation with my instructor and his explanations were as clear as possible. It was as if amidst the sudden isolation I simply lost the ability to gauge how well I was doing. I lacked an ability to accurately judge my efforts in relation to the interpretive community of our course and began to worry about falling behind. How much “capital” did I need to “accrue” for the final purchase? Without that weekly in-person meeting whereby I negotiated the extent of my understanding in community with other learners, I simply didn’t know.

For Comstock and Hocks, the physics of sound provides a fitting metaphor for this conception of mere presence among others as a key aspect of participation—one which I never realized had been grounding my ability to navigate classes in which participation was assessed. Discussing the science of sound, Comstock and Hocks observe that it is not physically possible for different bodies to occupy close quarters without experiencing the transfer of *resonance*—those sympathetic vibrations that inevitably move through each person present in a space, changing both the nature of any uttered sound, and each person through whom it moves. Reading and writing alone at home, I was missing those sympathetic vibrations, and I began to realize how ill-considered, binaristic, and vague my understanding of what constitutes my “participation” as a learner has almost always been (not to mention the ways that this lack of clarity has manifested itself in my teaching). Echoing Rachel, I now believe that there might be space to explore new commonplaces of participation, and yet my conclusion differs from hers in one significant way. Due to the inherent resonance that occurs between any bodies that share a space, I no longer believe there is any such thing as *mere* presence. In fact, I suggest our understanding of Critel’s commonplace of “embodiment” might be incomplete without a corollary commonplace of “presence” or “resonance” to capture what happens among embodied learners in shared physical spaces, like that drafty little high-rise classroom that hosted the first eight weeks of our Enlightenment Seminar.

Towards semester’s end, Dr. Harker sent out stats about how students had participated over the virtual half of the semester. As somebody who, as described above, finds myself obsessing over similar metrics with my own students above, I read them with interest. My rate of discussion board responses was a little better than average, and I’d viewed all videos, completed all readings, etc. But one particular point hit me like a punch in the gut. The memo explained that, on the high end, a few students had read and responded to nearly every post or project submitted by their classmates. Most everyone else had gone out of their way to at least stay current with their classmates’ contributions. And, on the low end, one or two learners neglected to click through their classmates’ posts altogether. I knew

one of those sad, solipsistic students was me and a binaristic notion of participation immediately manifested itself as a sickness in my stomach.

How could I have forgotten to engage my peers? Wasn't I the person who stressed collaboration and Critel's commonplace of "community" in my own syllabi? Wasn't I always preaching knowledge as the *social* creation of meaning? What was wrong with a person who held his learners to such a high standard of collaboration and then simply failed to do more than send a few peer reviews for the final 8 weeks of a semester? I don't know. The best I can do is reason that with all routines collapsing around me, I simply forgot other learners existed (beyond those assignments that explicitly required me to seek them out). Without their physical presence, I began functioning in a world of one. It wasn't malicious. But I apparently lacked any object permanence when it came to my classmates.

When I couldn't see them, it was as if they didn't exist.

Moving forward post-pandemic, I will focus on ways to more explicitly highlight this component of present, resonant participation in my in-person and hybrid classes, and create more explicit moments of resonant connection in online and asynchronous course designs, leveraging collaborative assignments and social learning activities to create some version of present, resonant community in spite of the separation foisted upon us by screens.

### **"I GOT THIS PART OF OUR CLASS WRONG."**

Michael, Instructor of Record for Enlightenment Rhetoric, Spring 2020

Prior to the onset of the pandemic, I had on numerous occasions voiced suspicions about the effectiveness and viability of online learning. I would often joke to my students that if they found the material in my class too difficult, they could always drop out of G.S.U. and "attend" one of the many online for-profit institutions advertised on Fox News. Snarkiness aside, I also expressed my concerns about online education in a co-authored (with Mary Hocks and Matthew Sansbury) contribution to *The Rhetoric of Participation*—a collection honoring Genevieve Critel's critical examination of participation in writing studies. In "The Success of This Course Depends Upon Your Participation," we analyze the rhetoric of participation in massive open online courses (MOOCs), noting significant contradictions among MOOC provider user agreements and instructor syllabi. We conclude that the infrastructure supporting online learning depends on problematic attitudes about the fundamental nature and value of participation for students and instructors.

So it was with significant ambivalence that I complied with directives from university administration to move online my graduate seminar on Enlightenment-era

rhetoric. It is not that I believed such instructions unwarranted. I was an early adopter of mask wearing and social-distancing, purchasing my first box of N95 masks from the drywall aisle of a Home Depot on January 25, 2020—six days before the WHO declared a world health emergency. My misgivings were also not grounded in a generational bias about teaching with technology. As a scholar who had long valued multimodal approaches to teaching, I was committed to helping my students compose in a variety of ways for multiple audiences—to discovering *all* of the available means of persuasion for any given particular situation. Yet, despite these commitments, my experience with online professional development seminars and research on M.O.O.C.s left me apprehensive about transitioning to online learning for a graduate seminar during a pandemic. Would prompts posted in online forums allow my graduate students to engage meaningfully in discussions of Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*? How would my students give presentations to peers on Adam Smith and David Hume? In what ways would I need to rethink my “tried and true” lecture on Giambattista Vico’s treatise on imagination?

By late March 2020, university administrators and governing bodies of various professional organizations of my field had finally recognized the prolonged public health threat posed by COVID-19. As a result, faculty and staff at our university were required to participate in a number of initiatives to support moving all instruction online. Emphasizing asynchronous pedagogical approaches, our “crash course” provided access to digital infrastructure and templates for assignments, syllabi, quizzes, and other tools. Although I lacked the bandwidth and technological infrastructure at home to complete some required tasks like uploading video lectures, I found the course effective and relevant to the challenges I was facing as an educator in that particular moment.

As our graduate course came to the end of the semester, I was feeling more comfortable with the asynchronous nature of the class. I was posting weekly video lectures related to theories and figures from the period. I was responding to and evaluating reading responses a couple of times a week. I was answering student questions via email and holding individual video conferences with students to provide feedback on higher stakes assignments. But when it came time to evaluate the performance of students across the semester, I found myself more uncertain than ever, especially when evaluating student participation.

I had given what I thought was some critical thought to the idea of participation as I put together my syllabus for this graduate seminar. I had worked over the past 5 years or so to replace a generic participation policy with what I was calling “The Scholarly Disposition.” My reason for making this change is that I wanted to reinforce the unique context of what it means to be a student at an urban research 1 (R1) university in the south. I wanted my students to understand that the expectations associated with location—*where* we study—shape our values and



behaviors, impacting *how* we study. I also wanted to acknowledge the performative nature of all forms of participation in every context. I would frequently argue that as members of a research community, the stakes are high around writing, research, and decorum. This pep talk seemed to resonate with most students, but it always lacked specifics. I never delineated what behaviors or practices comprised the scholarly disposition; it was just something I thought I would recognize if students got it “just-right.”

As evidenced by Rachel’s and Keaton’s reflections, I got this part of our class wrong. With looming deadlines for posting grades as well as requirements to develop new online courses to support an unexpected increase in summer enrollments during the pandemic, I turned to the “class progress” and data collection widgets in our class management system to gauge student participation. I never articulated to students that I would employ our class management system’s surveillance applications to measure engagement by quantifying the number of discussion posts read or responded to, assignments accessed, or readings downloaded. As a result, although I aspired to go beyond a commonsensical participation policy by acknowledging the performative nature of scholarly dispositions, I ended up employing one of the least transparent versions of Bradbury and Muhlhauser’s Goldiloxxing participation. Simply put, my assessment of participation in our graduate seminar was both poorly executed and pedagogically unsound.

Yes, at the time, we were all doing our best under the circumstances. In retrospect, I believe I could have done much more to ease the transition from face-to-face learning to asynchronous, virtual learning by doing one thing in particular: listening to my students. Critel concludes her investigation of student participation in the writing classroom with what seem like such obvious questions: “What if we asked students to tell us how they will participate? What if we asked them what they need from us?” What kept me from emailing similar questions to Rachel? Modeling a version of the scholarly disposition I was expecting from students could have reduced some of the burdens she was facing as a first time composition instructor during the onset of a global pandemic. Why didn’t I reach out to Keaton to ask him for insight about how we might rethink the participation requirement for our course? Knowing more about his day-to-day challenges of completing coursework and teaching in the pandemic surely would have proved valuable. Again, I know that COVID-19 presented unprecedented pedagogical challenges and that, as we often say, hindsight is twenty-twenty. But these questions haunt me as I think back on how *I* participated as the instructor in our class. They have helped me realize that my misgivings about online learning grew out of an incomplete understanding of what counts as meaningful participation altogether—not only in online environments—but also in face-to-face interactions with my students.

## CONCLUSION

While nobody involved in this project is necessarily thankful for the trauma of recent months, our experiences in the Enlightenment Rhetoric seminar have provided us a chance to live out a sunnier version of that statement on cynical politicking that has been attributed to everyone from Rahm Emmanuel to Winston Churchill: “Never waste a good crisis.” If nothing else, 2020 gifted those of us who toggle between online and in-person teaching a perfect opportunity to clarify just what it is we’re talking about when we talk about participation. For Rachel, this will mean formulating a more sophisticated, nuanced emphasis on *engaged* attendance as she teaches, not merely for the sake of ensuring that seats are filled with warm bodies, but so that each learner can benefit from the kind of communal dialogue she so sorely missed during the late spring of 2020. In Keaton’s case, COVID clarified the necessity of creating opportunities for learners in online classes to engage each other directly in the social creation of knowledge, performing collaborative activities that remind students that although they may be separated by screens, they are not alone. Finally, Michael’s experience diving into distance learning midway through the Enlightenment Rhetoric seminar revealed the importance of transparently communicating the assumptions that undergird our assessments of participation, and even the benefits we might discover if we allowed students to speak back to these assumptions, especially in times of crisis.

Reflecting further on our experience with pedagogical dislocations brought about by COVID-19, we conclude that many of the challenges we navigated during the spring of 2020 were exacerbated not merely by our ignorance of how to negotiate participation in this brave new digital world, but out of some naive attitudes and unquestioned assumptions about the process of assessing participation in general. Rachel and Keaton’s narratives testify to the unexamined approach learners and instructors alike apply to Critel’s commonplace of “community,” potentially mentioning it in a syllabus (as instructors) or making a mental note to speak out in class (as learners) without articulating what shared goals might exist for those on either side of the lectern. Likewise, Michael’s story makes it clear how often overburdened instructors are left to apply Justice Potter Stewart’s infamous, imprecise “know-it-when-I-see-it” heuristic to the process of assessing participation (Price qtd. Critel).

Lacking the ability to inhabit the mind of another person, we uneasily substitute an easier, more answerable question to fill required boxes in our gradebooks: how do I feel about this person’s *effort* based upon the information I can immediately access through my own memory or the quantitative tools in this app? While some subjectivity is probably unavoidable in any assessment process, the first semester of COVID made clear to each of us some problems that occur when the guiding principles and expectations undergirding evaluation are formulated

on the go and without critical discussion. Teacher-researchers would do well to view COVID-19 as an inciting incident prompting a number of critical pedagogical reflections. As our experiences demonstrate, experiences with virtual learning have much to teach us about face-to-face pedagogical experiences. Above all, we must maintain a critical awareness of the unspoken assumptions and normative values that exist around participation requirements. Doing so provides the perspective to resist binaristic conceptions of participation and the language to complicate, question, identify, and recognize distinct conceptions of learning that shape our attitudes and interactions between students and instructors across courses and modalities.

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# Flipping Composition Instruction: Amplifying Flexibility, Increasing Delight

TARA MOORE

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The pandemic of 2020 flipped my classroom for me, and I have been tinkering with the process ever since. Flipped classrooms have attracted attention for several decades, but the trend exploded worldwide in 2020. Academic institutions around the world moved from having the rare workshop on flipped learning to promoting flipped learning as a lifeline for faculty looking for ways to offer remote instruction (Dulamă and Ilovan 103; Furqan et al. 255; Roy et al. 1; Shinn 37). Even before the pandemic, flipped learning was known for increasing “in-class active learning time by shifting delivery of content to the online environment” (Linder 1). In the flipped classroom, students engage with course content before coming to the classroom; then, the instructor devotes class time to practicing that material with “higher order work” (Talbert 5). Students benefit from viewing new content in a space they find most comfortable. When they come to class, they put that learning into practice by working in writing labs or deepening activities.

Pre-pandemic, my lesson plans aligned with what Robert Talbert calls the “traditional model”: a mini-lecture introducing that day’s new content (4). If we had time remaining, students would begin working on an activity. This plan successfully conveyed composition instruction. However, it also presented a fairly rigid form of instruction, with the possibility of a lengthy lecture that leached into time for active learning—a common peril for me and, it turns out, for other faculty (Talbert 9). In addition, a student could have been distracted during her one chance to hear the lecture. Students who missed class due to a college sports

commitment or illness might plan to copy the lecture notes from a friend (does that ever really happen?), but they would never hear the exact lesson that the synchronous students received.

I created my first flipped composition section to serve the demands of COVID-19-related hy-flex teaching in the fall of 2020. With the flipped approach to composition, I assigned short video lectures covering that same information I once delivered in person. Some watched the video multiple times or revisited the video during a later assignment when they found they needed a refresher. If a student missed class for quarantine, she could easily view the video lecture and access the connected in-class activity in the learning management system (LMS).

By adapting to the flipped classroom approach, the course shifted from one in which I did most of the talking to one in which students used class time to practice skills together and to ask questions they had along the way. I moved them into the synchronous activity as quickly as possible. I bit my tongue rather than take up time with additional lectures in the classroom space. During the pandemic, it seemed more valuable to use synchronous time to promote human interactions. I have used this flipped modality in my composition courses for periods of remote teaching; hy-flex learning scenarios; and socially distanced, face-to-face synchronous instruction.

In this essay, I cover the best practices for flipping a composition course that I learned as I prepared to flip my composition course. I also explain the survey evidence I collected my second time through the flipped composition course, highlighting the features of flipped learning students valued. The flipped approach offered welcome shifts in my teaching workload, even during a season of pandemic teaching.

## **PREPARING FOR FLIPPED LEARNING WITH AN OUTCOMES-BASED DESIGN**

When I turned to flipped learning in 2020 to serve the unprecedented challenge of teaching in a pandemic, I knew that I still needed to incorporate best practices like backward design, which I had fortuitously applied to my composition course the previous year. My college allowed students to select remote or in-person learning in fall of 2020, so I spent the summer break thinking about how I should adapt my class to serve two different modalities of learners. In the end, my instructional designer recommended that I split up the two modalities, and I relied on flipped learning to export the lectures from my typical lesson plan. The concept of backwards design helped enormously with the process of flipping

the course because I had already assessed each activity and each lecture for its relevance to the student learning outcomes (SLOs).

Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe famously champion backwards design in *Understanding by Design*. They argue that instructors’ “lessons, units, and courses should be logically inferred from the results sought, not derived from the methods, books and activities with which we are most comfortable” (14). Such outcomes-based course design pervades accredited disciplines, but may not be obligatory for composition.

Applying backwards design meant starting with SLOs and then imagining assessments that tested related skills (Schanke and Wartell 47). The next step was to plan activities that prepared students for the assessments. Each discussion, homework reading, process-writing step, and worksheet had to fit into a planned matrix of assessment and outcomes like the pieces of an orchestra harmonizing to bring forth a symphony. This course matrix process is what Wiggins and McTighe call “a robust approach to *planning*” (8).

As I applied the course matrix to my composition course, I found that some well-worn lessons had to go. Instructional designers Cindy Schanke and David Wardell caution instructors, “Be sure to include assessments that call for actual performance of what is being learned, using [assessments] over time so as to reveal growth, change, and increasing amounts of learning” (47–48). Before running the course through backwards design, I had a web writing assignment and an “adapt your research paper for a different audience” assignment, but not enough time to do full justice to either. Each one introduced entirely new concepts, and then I failed to integrate the skills together. I realized that they did not align well with the competencies I wanted to nurture in my students. To correct this, I removed both projects and reallocated the time to a new focus on revision strategies that aligned better with the learning outcomes and could be assessed with a revision portfolio. The new project built on skills students had been practicing all semester but still offered “increased amounts of learning.” After revising my assessments, I needed to make a plan to coach students in skills they needed for the assessments. Make no mistake, starting with a matrix and backwards design when building a new course is much easier than retrofitting a current course.

I also took the opportunity to make the backwards design process transparent to students and to challenge them to think in terms of the SLOs. At the midterm and again at the end of the semester, I assigned a Writer’s Statement, a reflection that prompts students to recognize their growth as writers. I directed them to look at the course SLOs, my feedback on essays, and their own earlier goal-setting activities. Since the SLOs came to determine every step of our course, some students actually commented on their growth in specific SLOs. When that happened, the circle was complete. Students grasped and appreciated the course goals to a high degree, so much so that the course placed in the top

10 % of my institution's "Progress on Relevant Objectives" assessment, which was a first for my composition course.

For me, one of the most frustrating complaints I used to see on student evaluations was the dreaded critique of "too much busywork." Running the backwards design course matrix forced me to remove content that did not fully connect with course assessment and SLOs. I could now tell students from the first day of class that every activity we would do in the course would tie to skills they would need for their major project assessments. I repeated the message throughout the semester so that students could begin to see how the pieces slip into place.

## THE NEXT STEPS IN FLIPPING A COURSE: VIDEO PRODUCTION CONSIDERATIONS

During the frantic preparation for pandemic teaching, I spent time learning how to produce successful videos for my flipped course. Our instructional designer assured us that students had been generous during the chaos of Spring 2020 teaching, but we needed to produce more polished content to offer in Fall 2020. I was able to use the matrix from my backward design work to identify each lecture I needed to flip. I now had to consider video length and student engagement. Data suggests that students prefer short videos (Meseguer-Martinez et al. 66). They want shorter videos of 1–3 minutes for assignment explanations, but they will watch longer videos of 5–7 minutes "when learning a new concept" (Campbell et al. 217). I settled on a goal of producing videos of six minutes or less. I created concise lectures for the videos, ones with focus and without the tangents that can characterize a synchronous lecture.

The intimacy of the small screen teaching allowed me to model strong examples of writing with greater specificity than ever before. When I taught the mnemonic "Cite as you write" in a video lecture, I showed images of my handwritten notes from my dissertation research notebooks, demonstrating to students how they could gather citation information as soon as they found relevant data for their projects. This worked better than handing out my notebooks in class, as I used to do. In another video, I explained the IMRaD (Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion) article format and how to read it by walking students through a science article and highlighting the different sections while explaining which ones provide new information worthy of quoting or paraphrasing. This was also an improvement, since students used to follow along at their desks but were not all able to see the article on the big screen up front. In one video, I showed students examples of what I call the "breadcrumb trail," the direct link between the word in the in-text citation and the works cited entry. I could highlight the



related words to emphasize how they had to be the same. In the classroom lecture, this intimate, model-based instruction was not always possible. With the video, I curated the whole experience, showing students samples, inviting them to pause the video, and giving my pithy explanations that they could revisit, if needed. Best practice in flipped videos also argues in favor of having “instructor annotations”—overviews of the main points—at the start and end of the video (Campbell et al. 219).

Accessibility should also be on the mind of instructors planning to flip their composition classroom. I used the software VidGrid, which automatically captions videos. While none of the students in my flipped courses have had an accommodation for hearing impairment yet, a few students in my senior writing course have thanked me for including captions in videos I prepared for that course. They must have found the captions helpful for staying focused on the material. Students could also control the speed of the video, and they could access the transcript, if they wished. I learned to caption video immediately after completion—it is always easier to make content accessible as you produce it.

Since I wanted to model audience attentiveness, I considered how my composition students would engage with the material. I embedded two to three short videos into my LMS assignment. For one such assignment, I created a six-minute video on introduction paragraphs and a four-minute video on conclusions. At the top of the page, I gave students an overview of the material they were about to view in the assignment, and I indicated if the assignment required them to submit work. When possible I tied the lesson to the upcoming assessment. In the case of the introduction/conclusion videos, they earned points for digging up an old essay and evaluating it using the new information they had learned about introductions. When moving to a blended form of instruction, I found that consistent communication—even down to the way the lesson looks on in the LMS—helped students to navigate their task with confidence.

Instructors should also include some sort of engagement whenever possible (Campbell et al. 219). I built in low-stakes reflection questions for most video assignments. These reflection questions asked students to name “their greatest takeaway” or the “two main ideas” from the associated videos. Anecdotally, the faculty at my college had observed that our Spring 2020 video instruction was more successful when we included some sort of mini-assessment to ensure that students watched the content. This practice also aligns with Linder’s recommendation to include self-assessment in online multimedia productions (118–19). In addition to giving students a chance to “self-assess their understanding of the material,” the activity also helps the instructor gauge the effectiveness of that video or podcast in helping the student learn the material (Linder 119).

Such low-stakes engagements were especially helpful when it came to checking in with introverted students. One student never spoke unprompted during

synchronous meetings. However, he responded to all of the engagement activities connected to the video lectures. When the engagement activity asked students to assess his old introduction paragraph, his analysis was lengthy and well developed. His class participation earned a high “A” because it was tied to engagement with the material in the LMS. In his last essay, he chose to write about his anxiety with public speaking, which gave me insight into his classroom experience. Had I only observed his face-to-face interactions, I would have incorrectly assessed his participation levels. In this new format, every student—the bold and the timid—participated in lecture-based “discussions” personalized to them.

I discovered that it was useful to be transparent with students about the flipped nature of the course. At the start of the term, I explained how I expected them to engage with the material at home and in the classroom. Min Young Doo and Curtis J. Bonk explain that faculty should prepare students for the level of self-regulation needed to succeed in a flipped classroom (1005). Before the first class meeting, I assigned students a “Course Introduction” video, but the survey I administered mid-semester indicated I needed to do more. One student wrote: “I missed the first couple [of videos] and it brought down my grade, I also wish I would’ve realized in the beginning how valuable the videos would be so I didn’t have to go back and retake better notes. I understand those are personal issues and not flipped learning dislikes but I really enjoy the flipped learning.” To reinforce the importance of the lecture videos, faculty could watch the first one in class with students and model how to receive the information. Faculty could also assign an essay on multitasking to analyze as a persuasive document and then draw connections to how students prepare for class. Either activity could challenge students to think about the benefits of focusing on video lectures while avoiding self-distracting behaviors.

## **RE-CENTERING ACTIVE LEARNING WHILE FLIPPING A COURSE**

As I adapted my course, I considered another key issue in the scholarship on flipped learning: the balance between direct instruction and active learning. Linder uses the term “direct instruction” to refer to new content provided by the instructor so that the students can move on in the course (58). Direct instruction can take the form of traditional lectures or other types of multimedia instruction.

I have heard faculty state that they have always had a flipped classroom because the students complete readings as homework before coming to class. This shows a misapplication of the concept of direct instruction. In those courses, students are reading the content to come to class prepared to receive direct instruction from

the professor so they can understand those readings. Those students come ready to learn; in flipped instruction, students come ready to *do*.

Offloading the lectures or content introduction is only one aspect of flipping a classroom. Faculty must pair that arrangement with active synchronous engagement. The flipped classroom's re-centering on active learning transitions "classroom activities [...] from being teaching activities to being learning activities" (Linder 57). As Arunima Chaudhuri et al. explain, the pairing of the two crucial parts "aligns prior knowledge obtained with experiences and helps to prepare the learners" for transfer of knowledge to later experiences (609). When my family visited Colonial Williamsburg, the docent invited my daughter to sit down and weave wool yarn on the replica loom. Now, years later, my daughter still connects new information with that memorable experience because she learned through doing. Instructors can aspire to that level of meaning-making when we promote active learning.

Active learning can include group activities—games, jigsaw activities, peer review, role-playing, think/pair/shares, problem sets, large group discussion—and metacognitive activities like reflections, revision workshopping, self-assessment, and journaling (Linder 58–65).

Class time shifted when I adapted the course. In the past, I lectured about the benefits of the annotated bibliography during class time and then assigned students the task of creating one for homework. With the flipped design, I assigned a three-minute homework video explaining the benefits and format of an annotated bibliography, and I showed a successful sample. I also assigned a four-minute video on how to "Cite as You Write"—how to take notes from sources without losing track of the original source. In addition to the videos, I assigned students the homework task of taking notes on one of the sources they found in a prior in-class library research lab.

When we gathered synchronously, we moved to the action portion of this instruction. I opened by asking students to retrieve ideas about the annotated bibliography: what were the benefits of doing one? Retrieval is active learning that strengthens students' neural pathways and reminds them that they are practicing learning, not engaged in busywork (Harrington and Zakrajsek 113).

Then I asked students to access the annotated bibliography template that they had already seen in the video. They began a workshop in which they completed the worksheet with the fruits of their earlier research. Students were welcome to talk about the process in small groups to harness the benefits of the face-to-face modality. I circulated to answer questions and head off student frustrations that would have otherwise hindered their process. I found that students "can benefit from timely and constructive feedback about the result of their activity and their learning process" (Dulamă and Ilovan 104). By coaching students through the activity, I became a resource, and they learned by doing.

I found that their work was less desultory with this ordering of their active learning. Some students completed an annotated bibliography on three sources before the end of our session. Once they finished, they could submit the work and leave. I required submission so students could demonstrate their engagement and their growth on that skill. Students who needed the full time to complete the deepening activity stayed until the end of the session.

In the most recent version of this lesson, one student struggled with the skills and completed only one annotated bibliography entry in the 80-minute session. The in-class nature of his struggle meant that I could answer questions and redirect him as he encountered his knowledge gaps. He left with a new awareness of what went into the process of source evaluation, and he submitted the completed worksheet demonstrating his mastery of the skill by midnight on the same day. I always offer students this post-class extension option in case they need more time. I find it reduces the pressure to finish in class.

## **STUDENTS VOICED THE DOWNSIDE TO FLIPPED LEARNING**

The results of flipping the composition classroom seemed promising, so I chose to keep the arrangement for the following term of teaching through COVID-19. In the spring of 2021, I ran an IRB-approved study on flipped learning in my composition class. I taught fifteen traditional age first year college students at a small liberal arts college in a partly remote, partly in-person, synchronous modality. The study covered their comments on reflections and surveys. It elicited critiques of the flipped design. Students expressed two main concerns:

1. Distractibility during video lectures watched on their own
2. Inability to ask questions in the moment of learning

When I asked students to assess their concentration during the short videos compared to their “typical concentration [during] in-class professor lectures in other courses,” they responded with mixed but largely positive comments. Seven students stated outright that the agency they had over video viewing allowed them to concentrate on the new information. Four stated that they were better able to concentrate on in-person lectures; two of these same students indicated that while in-person lectures captured their attention more, they also appreciated the benefits of being able to rewatch the videos, an advantage in-person lectures did not provide. The two students who saw the video lectures as an unequivocal disadvantage pointed to the additional self-control it took to focus on them:

The assigned video lectures compared to a typical in class lecture I would say are a lot easier to get distracted from. When in class you have to pay attention to the material in case the professor asks a question or if they catch you not paying attention. But when it comes to the videos your a student just sitting in your dorm room veering off topic and not really paying attention to the actual material that is being taught throughout the videos.

My ability to concentrate has decreased when watching the videos because I watch them at night when I am tired, I do not have to act like I am paying attention and I have distractions like my phone around.

I believe early instruction on how to self-regulate could have helped to alleviate this problem.

Seven of thirteen students noted that when questions arose during video viewing, they could not ask them immediately. As one student wrote, “[If] a person has a specific question about a point made or example used in [a] video, it may be harder for them to remember to ask about it later in class.” This finding was valuable and in line with the standard student complaints that Talbert has identified (183). I had supposed students would use the low-stakes reflections to ask questions as well as reflect on the videos, but feedback shows they did not feel comfortable veering from the instructions. Based on this feedback, I plan to address this challenge in the future by placing a link to a LMS discussion and a reminder that they can text questions to my cell number (the Google Voice number I use for students) at the end of each video lesson. Students can then ask their questions, and I will respond either in the discussion, by text, or during the next class meeting.

## MY FINDINGS: STUDENT BENEFIT AND FLIPPED CLASSROOM

After reflecting on my experience and the IRB-approved survey results that I gathered during the spring of 2021, I was able to identify the following benefits of flipped instruction for my students:

1. Greater student agency over where and when to learn new content
2. More flexible course design
3. Re-watchable lectures aided learning
4. Lab-focused class sessions aided learning

### Finding 1. Greater Student Agency Over Where and When to Learn New Content

I took some pains in my syllabus and in person to explain the flipped classroom model, so students understood how the pedagogy was affecting our interactions.

Of the survey takers, 92.3 % agreed or strongly agreed that, “watching the course videos prepares me to succeed in EN100 and grow as a writer.” Several respondents shared personal experiences that aligned with the findings of flipped classroom scholars:

When I have the video lectures I feel as though I am more focused. It’s easier to take notes because I can pause the videos and go at the pace that I want. When the lectures are in person I tend to be less focused as I get distracted easier in the classroom.

I think that the before class videos are very beneficial to the in-class learning and personally helped me a lot. [...] I also think that it’s easier to concentrate on because you can take notes at your own pace, pause as needed, or go back if you need to listen to something again or need longer to take notes compared to if it was the in-class lecture information it’s not as easy/ convenient to do.

the days when I am sitting in my normal lecture class I often find myself dozing off because I am unable to concentrate for that long of a period of time. With the online videos and the fact that they have a point value associated with it makes me more focused and holds my attention for longer.

The last student referred to the low-stakes summary or reflection assignments that accompany most videos. I funneled those points into the class participation category, and students earned full credit for completion.

I was pleasantly surprised—stunned even—the first time students used writing ideas that had only been introduced in the video lecture but not in person and applied them correctly during the subsequent class activity. It was as if the content had already been absorbed into their vocabulary. This aligned with Sparks’ findings on flipped design: “students were better prepared to discuss material in class, students appeared to show deeper understanding of the material based on their verbal discussions of the topic” (68). Those results made sense since the class time activity was a review rather than an introduction to the content.

## Finding 2. More Flexible Course Design

When I faced a semester impacted by COVID-19 restrictions and flexible class attendance options, the blended classroom offered a solution for the demands of multiple modes of instruction. By flipping the lecture content for Fall 2020, I provided two modalities—the face-to-face students and the remote students—with identical lecture experiences and high quality visuals. It also allowed me to carve out time to teach both modalities in separate, back-to-back meetings, although this meant I taught longer than the eighty minutes allotted for class time. In the future, the practice will serve students absent due to athletics, illness, or personal emergencies.

### Finding 3. Re-Watchable Lectures Aided Learning

In the survey, 61.5 % stated they had watched at least one video more than once. During a post-paper reflection, students wrote about how the course design had helped them to meet the goals of the assignment. Some mentioned the process-writing nature of the assignment, a typical response. Five of the fifteen respondents called-out the class videos, saying that they helped. Some mentioned re-watching videos to learn a new concept, as shown in these responses:

One thing that was useful about our course design as I completed this essay was the pre lecture videos. I was able to go back and re-watch the video on introductions and managed to write a pretty solid one.

Being able to go back and watch videos to give me tips and tricks on how to write and what to avoid while writing was helpful while completing this essay.

I surveyed students about what caused them to re-watch a video. This garnered a critique of pacing: “the videos can be fast and cover a lot of information and my focus when watching the videos isn’t the strongest [resulting in multiple viewings].” The rest considered being able to re-watch videos to be a benefit, even if they only re-watched them in part. The following comment represents the common thread on why students re-watched the videos:

To better understand the concept; I also used it to refresh my memory on how to write a specific part of an essay. Rewatching those videos has been very beneficial in helping writing my essays.

Students also responded to this optional narrative prompt: “If I were the professor, I would keep the following items the same.” Of 16 respondents, 31 % specifically named the videos as an element of the course that they recommended retaining for the future.

### Finding 4. Lab-Focused Class Sessions Aided Learning

My personality as an instructor means that I look forward to workshop lessons. Fortunately, the feedback showed evidence that students enjoyed that arrangement too. Talbert finds that students are “generally *happier* with the [flipped] course” (xiii). During the season of COVID-19, I placed more value than ever on the aspects of instruction that decreased stress and elevated delight. Moreover, I recognized how the workshop time led to greater development of the student-instructor mentoring relationship, an aspect of teaching I relish.

Surveyed students assessed the workshop-nature of our class meetings, and 69.2 % of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I like the

active workshop design of our in-the-classroom lessons.” The remaining students remained neutral, selecting “neither agree nor disagree” to this statement. The following comment demonstrates how a student valued the workshop approach to class:

One thing that I found very useful about the course design when completing my essay was that in multiple classes I was able to get some parts of the paper done in class. For example, I got a very big head start on my paper plan, was able to find multiple sources when we were brought to the library and was able to have my entire paper peer reviewed to offer an[y] tips.

When invited to share optional, additional comments on flipped learning, the feedback showed a significant positive response. Four comments were neutral, and the remaining nine praised the instructional format. One was particularly memorable:

Its not a bad way of doing things, actually I like it more, It makes the work load seem easier. The videos and before class assignments aren't too long so it usually will get done, and the in class activities are easier in class then rather doing it on your own without a professors help.

That student's review will continue to shape my use of flipped design post-pandemic.

Studies in many different disciplines have found that students have positive reactions when they take flipped classes (Donkor; Elliot; Jensen et al.; Johnston and Karafotias 235; Mortensen and Nicholson 3780), despite evidence that the practice may not necessarily result in higher course grades. While some scholars like Roland J. Sparks have argued that student reports about flipped learning might not necessarily track closely with actual improvement in learning, I see other clear benefits in the practice. I am an introvert who delights in mentoring the individual student. The preparation for a lecture, even one I have taught ten times before, adds a touch of stress to each class day. Will I remember to mention everything? Have I printed my lesson plan and prepped my slides? In contrast, the flipped design allows me to walk into a classroom to coach students on one focal activity, replacing the stress with light-hearted anticipation. Flipping suits me. I poured my composition instruction into carefully planned videos, simplifying the actual lesson preparation ahead of each session. The videos will work for several years and across multiple sections and modalities. I can see how instructors who relish extemporaneous lectures may cringe at the idea of capturing their charm in a podcast or video. Flipped learning is not for everyone, but it provided the flexibility my students and I needed for a year of pandemic teaching.



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# Writing as a Team Sport: Cultivating Community in the Online Writing Classroom

ABBY SCHROERING

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## INTRODUCTION

As an incoming graduate student, I envisioned myself spending countless hours alone with my books, alone in the archives, and alone at my writing desk—the epitome of a solitary writer, apparently producing knowledge from thin air and sheer force of mind power. While there is certainly some solitude in the work life of a dissertation researcher, that self-image was quickly replaced by the deeply social reality of seminars, conferences, colloquia, committee meetings, writing groups, casual chats with friends and colleagues, and the myriad other ways that scholars help each other to understand, synthesize, and expand the work in our fields. Not only is this reality generally more personally fulfilling, it also results in more complex, developed, coherent writing. Writing is, at its best, a team sport.

Yet, when I began teaching first-year composition, I noticed that students came into the class carrying the same preconception of writing as a solitary act sparked by inherent genius and creativity. They resisted sharing their works-in-progress with each other, balked at my first attempts to facilitate peer-review processes, and approached feedback and revision as if it were a source of shame. This mindset is not unique to the writing classroom or to my first set of students. In *How Humans Learn: The Science and Stories of Effective College Teaching*, Josh Eyler laments that, although “science has demonstrated that our sociality is entwined with our learning processes,” teachers and students still often perceive education

as a solitary endeavor because “educational systems tend to replicate themselves, and the history of education in America is dominated by a focus on individual achievement” (78). Over the course of that first semester of teaching, and over a few iterations of the course, I found ways (again, with the help of my friends and colleagues) to start normalizing teamwork and revision from the very first class meeting. Eventually, students began to feel comfortable approaching each other for feedback before approaching me, chatting informally about readings and ideas inside and outside of the classroom, and generally working together. It was by no means a perfect image of classroom harmony and collaboration, but it was on the right track.

Then, along with most of the rest of higher education, my classroom communities were shattered and dispersed by a rogue virus that put a wall of screens and external anxieties between teachers and learners. I had never taught online before, and my first pedagogical concern was that this spelled the end of writing as a team sport. In *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes*, Flower Darby and James M. Lang write that, while classroom communities often happen naturally in physical classroom spaces, “it doesn’t always happen so easily in an online class. As we have seen, online students are typically isolated, sitting alone behind a computer screen, engaging with class content by themselves. They experience little, if any, real-time exchanges or collaboration with other people, whether students or the instructor” (162). Physical separation has been shown to increase learner experiences of isolation and alienation (Wei et al. 530), creating a kind of psychological distance that may contribute to the high dropout rates in many pre-pandemic online course contexts (Eyler 109–10; Rovai 198). Watching my students alone in their rooms, lit by the glare of their monitors, sitting in awkward silences in breakout rooms and struggling to keep their cameras on at the end of Fall 2020, I resolved that priority number one for all of my future teaching, online or in-person or something in between, would be cultivating a strong sense of classroom community.

The goal of a vibrant and supportive classroom community is not only in service of making class time less awkward and more enjoyable, although that is certainly an emotional benefit. Eyler has shown that learning is an inherently social process, hard-wired into human behavior: “All learning, then, happens in a social context because we are learning with and from one another. This is as true in college as it is in any other educational environment” (66). When we, as instructors, can mobilize sociality in service of learning goals, students learn more effectively and perceive a more positive educational experience. In the early 20th century, Lev Vygotsky identified and explained the mechanism by which social interaction improves learning: “zones of proximal development.” Zones of proximal development illustrate the potential for a learner to achieve a learning goal: there is an initial, interior zone that describes what the learner can achieve

independently, and then another, more expansive zone surrounding that interior zone that describes what the learner can achieve with help from another person. In other words, learners have a higher learning potential when learning together than when learning individually (Eyler 80; Vygotsky 84). Based on this understanding, it follows that a classroom community based in teamwork and collaboration “creates, in practice, a network of mutual support and assistance that is distributed among all the participating students as well as with the teacher” (Mauri and Onrubia 95), increasing the learning potential of the group as a whole and of each individual within the group. This theory has been proven across fields of teaching, including in teaching writing. As Carola Strobl summarizes, peer collaboration has been shown to “foster reader-orientation,” increase “awareness of effective strategy use,” and reduce writing-induced anxiety for individual writers, among other benefits to high-order thinking skills (68).

In this chapter, I narrate my experience as a graduate student trying to harness these learning benefits of sociality by facilitating a team-oriented ethos in an online writing classroom. In this qualitative case study analysis, I reflect on these efforts through the lens of the evidence-based community of inquiry (CoI) model proposed by D. Randy Garrison, Terry Anderson, and Walter Archer in 1999 and further developed by Flower and Lang in *Small Teaching Online* in 2019. Through this framework, I share the interventions I made, their results on both student performance and student experience of the course based on coursework assessment and students’ written feedback and course evaluations, and challenges we faced, with recommendations, suggestions, and strategies. Throughout, I also signal which interventions can be effectively applied in an in-person context in order to carry forward the lessons learned from a time of disruption.

## FROM PEER REVIEW TO COMMUNITIES OF INQUIRY

The most comprehensive framework for building a sense of classroom community in an online setting that I came across in preparing to redesign my first-year composition course for the Zoom era is the community of inquiry. Garrison et al. define a CoI as a composition of both teachers and learners that brings about a “worthwhile educational experience ... through the interaction of three core elements ...: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence” (88). The instructor is in a position to cultivate and nurture each kind of presence in the online classroom through various hi- and lo-tech interventions.

Flower and Lang cite and explain the three modes of presence that Garrison et al. outline, beginning with cognitive presence. Cognitive presence is “the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication,” and

it is dependent on learners' engagement "in activities like reflecting deeply on the course content, drawing new and creative connections with course material, or opening themselves to new ideas and ways of understanding" (165). In order to bolster cognitive presence, I opened several pathways for students to stay in touch with each other about course content both asynchronously and synchronously:

### Asynchronous Interventions

- *Discussion Boards*: Many instructors used discussion boards to some extent before the shift to online teaching, often as a means of collecting student reflections on readings. In the Zoom era, these asynchronous spaces become even more important: students in multiple time zones can sign on at whatever time is convenient for them, contribute to an ongoing conversation, and post questions that their peers will have engaged with by the time they wake up. I did not require discussion board posts, but I created boards as spaces for students to ask each other clarifying questions about key concepts from readings and class time. Some weeks, no one posted anything, but in particularly challenging sections of the class, the boards were vibrant. Most learning management systems have a discussion board or forum feature, and the same effect can be created through Google Groups, Padlet, and other applications.
- *Collaborative Reading*: In addition to making the writing process as collaborative as possible, I encouraged students to rely on sociality in understanding the course readings. In this intervention, students read independently at their own pace, but they are able to leave highlights and marginal annotations that the rest of the class can see and engage with. This method allows the instructor to keep tabs on who is keeping up with the reading and where the class needs more support, and it also facilitates asynchronous cognitive presence by allowing students to engage with each other's understanding of course content. June Griffin and Deborah Minter add that "social reading assignments make reading more writerly" and help to situate "students' inquiries directly in that softened boundary where the movement between reading and writing is most fluid" (142), making the intervention especially appropriate for writing classrooms. Students responded positively to this intervention, expressing that it made the reading easier and faster to digest, improving both student comprehension and rates of completion. Two applications that offer collaborative annotation functionality are Perusall and Hypothesis, but similar benefits can be achieved through a shared Google Doc.

## Synchronous Interventions

- *In-Class Breakout Room Discussions:* Breakout rooms of video conference applications like Zoom have become a critical tool for maintaining an active learning environment in the online classroom. Breakout rooms divide a large video conference into several smaller video conferences so that students can engage in pair or small-group work, allowing for more direct peer-to-peer interaction and facilitating a higher perception of cognitive presence. In our synchronous sessions, students spent at least one-third and sometimes up to two-thirds of class time working together in breakout rooms. At first, facilitating breakout rooms effectively was challenging: sometimes the students felt too awkward to begin working right away; the fact that the instructor can't see all of the rooms at once makes it difficult to ensure that everyone is staying on track; and some students had internet setups or living situations that made participating in breakout rooms on-camera difficult. Over the course of the semester, I introduced shared Google Docs that groups could use to stay on track, keep notes, and share their thoughts if they couldn't speak on camera. These Docs also provide the instructor with insight into how the group is progressing. Because of these facilitation, retention, and organizational benefits, the use of collaborative documents will be something to carry forward into in-person contexts when the appropriate technology is available. I also began assigning each student a "role" in the breakout room based on a random factor (more below) and started popping in on each room with my camera and microphone off to eavesdrop without interrupting conversation as much as possible. Students still occasionally expressed feeling awkward in breakout rooms, and activity would still occasionally stall out, but by the end of the semester, we had established a routine in which most breakout rooms were effective active learning experiences.
- *24 Hour Student Space:* Partway through the semester, a colleague of mine shared a method of creating a perpetual Zoom room to which all of the students in the class have access by setting up a repeating 24-hour-long meeting that participants can join without the host. Effectively, this setup gives students access to the instructor's Zoom Pro account without the instructor having to be present in the Zoom room. I used this technique to create a "Student Space" that students were welcome to use at any time to collaborate without the instructor (me) looming in the background—a sort of digital version of meeting up with your friends in the campus common areas to talk about class and work on assignments together. I never entered the Student Space, but I set up Zoom notifications such that I received an

email each time a student entered the room. Based on these emails, students were meeting each other outside of class time 2–3 times a week on average at all times of day and night. This technique relies on institutions supporting instructors by providing access to unrestricted video conferencing (in this case, a Zoom Pro account) and on trust that everyone using the space will adhere to institutional codes of conduct and community agreements (more below). In our context, the students who used the Zoom room (about 60 % of the class) expressed appreciation for its convenience, and they periodically referenced insights gained from Student Space sessions during synchronous full-class meetings.

Through these interventions, students had access to sustainable modes of communication virtually on-demand. Asynchronously and synchronously, through written, verbal, and visual communication, these multiple forms of peer-to-peer contact supported cognitive presence in the online class setting.

Social presence differs from cognitive presence in that, as opposed to being expressly focused on course content and learning goals, social presence describes “the ability of participants in the Community of Inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as ‘real people.’” Social presence can be established or indicated in a community of inquiry through such factors as “emotional expression, open communication, and group cohesion” (Flower and Lang 165–66). Even though social presence is often supported through interventions that do not directly scaffold student progress toward course goals, research has shown that “social presence is a predictor of perceived learning outcomes and learner satisfaction” and “important as a support for cognitive and affective objectives of learning through sustained interactions” (Wei et al. 530). In her influential *Minds Online: Teaching Effectively with Technology*, Michelle D. Miller insists that, “creating social presence is another thing that online instructors need to pay special attention to,” because “going the extra mile to do this doesn’t just make the class more pleasant, but is also an important predictor of success in the course.” Some strategies that she suggests include “encouraging students to offer personal information, eliciting supportive communications between students, and using communication tools that transmit facial expressions and vocal tone” (29). Many of the cognitive presence interventions listed above have the benefit of also facilitating social presence by increasing opportunities for peer-to-peer contact. That double-duty is especially true of the Student Space, which students employed for casual socialization as often as for dedicated group writing or peer-review time. I also built in several opportunities for students to express themselves as “real people” through the use of specific course policies and classroom routines:



## Course Policies

- *Community Agreement:* At the beginning of the semester, everyone in our CoI contributed to a Community Agreement that we committed to follow in all of our interactions with each other, both synchronously and asynchronously. I provided a template agreement sourced from a combination of resources from the Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning. In a shared Google Doc, students then edited and commented on the Community Agreement in order to advocate for guidelines that were important for their own learning and comfort. Throughout this process, students engaged each other in the comments about such topics as the meaning of the term “inclusive language,” comfort levels of being on-camera on Zoom, and their gender identities and preferred pronouns. Before the class met synchronously, students already had a sense that they were actively and meaningfully contributing to the creation of a classroom community. We checked in on and updated the Community Agreement three more times over the course of the semester, with each engagement providing an opportunity for students to express themselves and their values, thereby bolstering a sense of social presence. This practice is not limited to online teaching contexts, and the community-building elements of making and continually revising the agreement make it worth doing both online and in-person.
- *Assessment Personalization:* Especially in the writing classroom, assessments can provide an opportunity for students to incorporate their personal characteristics into the learning goals of the class. Instructors can support students’ emotional presence in assessments through assessment design, framing, and group engagement. When possible, designing assessments (and rubrics) to make space for students to follow their own personal interests, commitments, and styles bolsters student agency and builds social presence into coursework. Self-directed assessment comes naturally in some common assessments—for example, a research essay in which the student is responsible for choosing their own research question and methodology—and less naturally in others—for example, a close-reading essay in which the entire class must engage the same object of analysis. In either situation, explicitly framing the assessments as opportunities for students to pursue their own interests through the assessment instructions, reflection activities, and one-on-one advising can help students make the connection. For example, even if a student is not interested in the particular essay that they have been assigned to close-read, careful framing can help the student to recognize a pattern or theme within the essay that does catch their interest. Increasing students’ perceived agency in assessment is a pedagogical goal in

its own right, but it also boosts the social presence of the CoI because the assessments frequently serve as the foundation of peer-to-peer interaction in the course. While working in a peer-review session in breakout rooms, social presence is higher when a student feels that sharing and discussing their work is also sharing and discussing their personal values and investments.

## Classroom Routines

- *Emotional Check-Ins*: One powerful intervention that I picked up at the 2020 Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network virtual conference is simply asking the question “how are you feeling?” at the beginning of each class session and providing space for honest responses. Polling tools like Poll Everywhere give students the option of responding to these questions anonymously—I use the “word cloud” feature and share my screen with the results so that the whole class can have a general sense of the emotions in the virtual space without calling out any one individual and asking them to explain themselves. On video conferencing, it is more difficult to accurately read facial expressions and body language and to gauge mood and tone, which is a hindrance to social presence in a CoI. Emotional check-ins are an efficient mechanism for making the “vibe” of the virtual space explicit, and they can be a release valve for managing emotions during turbulent times. There was a mix of positive and negative emotions in each word cloud: “tired” and “exhausted” were perennial front-runners; “sad,” “livid,” and “overwhelmed” came up on particularly difficult days; “excited” and “great” featured prominently on high-spirited days (especially toward the end of the semester); and students occasionally put nonsensical answers like “purple” or emoticons, which I interpreted as “goofy.” Regardless of the overall tone of the resulting word cloud, I wrap up the check-in by acknowledging what I see and thanking everyone for showing up, regardless of how they’re feeling. This strategy provides an outlet for students’ emotional expression, provides a snapshot of the group as a unit, and helps the instructor know how to best meet students where they are for the session. This, too, is a practice that is easily applicable and worth doing in an in-person setting—students can check in anonymously through their phones or computers, or through a more analog mode of participation such as ballot-style strips of paper in a box.
- *Breakout Room Icebreakers*: An easy way to help students express themselves as real people and break the ice in breakout rooms is to assign students

roles based on low-stakes identifying information about the students. I use the roles “facilitator” (keeps time, makes sure all voices are heard evenly), “note-taker” (keeps and organizes notes from the small-group conversation on the shared document), “designated speaker” (reports on group’s conversation upon return to the full group), and “swing” (performs role of facilitator when the facilitator is speaking, performs the role of note-taker when note-taker is speaking). Some ways that I have assigned roles include distributing them by shoe size, by the number of physical books in the room the student is sitting in, alphabetically by hometown, and by geographical location (e.g., the person who is closest to the Grand Canyon is the facilitator, the person who is farthest is the swing). This method gives students something to do as soon as they get into breakout rooms to avoid that awkward moment of silence, and it also encourages them to share little pieces of information about themselves that are unrelated to course content, boosting social presence and facilitating a sense of community. Even when students are not dealing with breakout room-specific awkwardness, assigning roles in this manner helps to encourage peer-to-peer connection and jumpstart the group work process, which is why I will continue to incorporate these icebreakers in both online and in-person courses moving forward.

The final mode of presence in an effective CoI is “teaching presence.” Contrary to how it sounds, effective teaching presence is not necessarily the instructor being *more* present, as in taking up a lot of synchronous time and space with engaging content delivery and feedback. Rather, teaching presence “works in concert with the first two in order ‘to support and enhance social and cognitive presence for the purpose of realizing educational outcomes.’ Practically speaking, this can occur through both the ‘design of the educational experience’ and ‘facilitation; of learning within the course’” (Flower and Lang 166). Indeed, much of the educational research and literature on online learning suggests that teaching is more effective when instructors “greatly reduce the amount of ‘telling’ they do, relative to the amount of classroom activities and ‘partnering’” (Prensky 137). In order to reduce instructor “telling,” the direct delivery of information shifts to the asynchronous online component of the course—readings, pre-recorded lectures, etc.—and the instructor becomes more of a learning facilitator and one-on-one mentor for students. G. Blue Brazelton writes that “instruction can be reframed as a partnership with the student in their education. Instructors should focus on connecting with learners about the material and providing individualized feedback” (107). In order to facilitate cognitive and social presence effectively in an online CoI, teaching presence effectively involves decentering the instructor as the point of focus in synchronous class meetings.

In my own efforts to decenter myself as an instructor in order to facilitate cognitive and social presence, my online first-year writing course evolved into a form of the flipped classroom model of education. The exact characteristics and methodologies of the flipped classroom vary from field to field and from instructor to instructor, but most of them share a few essential features: there is almost no in-class lecture time, content delivery occurs via asynchronous online materials, and synchronous time is dedicated to active learning activities in which students review and apply what they learned before class (Al-Samarraie et al. 1018; Saichaie 97) (see Table 5.1). The theory behind flipped classrooms is that they increase flexibility for students by giving them unlimited on-demand access to the content of the course in multiple modalities, and they develop agency and learn more deeply because of the increased time spent in active learning activities in the company of their peers (Isaias 134).

Table 5.1: Structure of a Flipped Writing Classroom Session

<i>When?</i>	<i>What?</i>	<i>Example Activities</i>
Before Class (Asynchronous)	Direct Delivery	Collaborative Reading Pre-recorded Lecture
	Low-Stakes Assessment of Content	Collaborative Reading Annotations Short Quiz Reflective Discussion Post
During Class (Synchronous)	Active Learning Activities	Peer Teaching Peer Review of Draft Material Drafting/Revision Time in Small Groups
After Class (Asynchronous)	Continue Content Application	Continue Drafting

The effect of the flipped classroom model has not been studied widely in the context of the writing classroom, but it has been studied extensively in the context of both STEM and language-learning classrooms. The results in both settings are positive in terms of students' progress toward learning objectives and their perception of class time, suggesting that the form contributes to students' understanding of material, motivation, participation, confidence, and knowledge transfer (Al-Samarraie et al. 1034, 1044). Kem Saichaie also finds that the flipped classroom model contributes to the creation of an inclusive course environment—a crucial factor in any CoI—by increasing feedback opportunities and access to course

content for all students regardless of their prior academic preparation or English competency (98). In my course, I noticed that several of the students accessed the learning management system (LMS) pages hosting pre-recorded lectures multiple times before and after the relevant synchronous class meeting, suggesting that they were either reviewing the video multiple times or watching it in multiple digestible chunks according to their needs. In course evaluations, they explicitly expressed that the accessibility of asynchronous lecture-style course content improved their experience of the course, which has motivated me to maintain the use of asynchronous direct delivery even as my teaching shifts back to in-person settings. Effective application of this classroom model places special emphasis on the importance of effective LMS organization and the presentation of content through multiple modalities, (i.e., verbally through lectures, visually through slides and handouts, and in writing through readings and model assignments).

## CONCLUSION

The greatest challenge we faced in implementing these interventions to facilitate a sense of community in the classroom was time: in-class activities like crafting and reviewing community agreements, engaging in emotional check-ins, and participating in breakout room icebreakers consume scarce synchronous minutes, and the flipped classroom model has the potential to overload students with pre-class content delivery if the instructor is not mindful of the quantity and quality of materials they are asking students to digest. In the particularly challenging Fall 2020 semester, after reviewing the course structure with the students about six weeks in, it became apparent that the pre-class workload was too heavy. Where at the beginning of the semester I had been assigning one reading about the craft of writing, one 15–20-minute recorded lecture, one model piece of writing, and sometimes one object of analysis for each class, by the end of the semester I had reduced that load to assign the same amount of material for the entire week. Students expressed that that pacing was more effective and manageable, which was reflected in their increased engagement with the collaborative readings and increased pre-recorded lecture views. As an instructor, this reduction of the quantity of content to be covered helped me to articulate what skills and concepts I believed to be truly crucial to the craft of writing, which lent focus and direction to every aspect of the course moving forward and has similarly altered my plans for future in-person teaching.

While far from a perfect run of this first-year writing course, our endeavor to center community in teaching and learning resulted in an overall positive experience. From the students' perspective, one-on-one communication and course evaluation feedback revealed that this class was often their only opportunity to

interact directly with their peers, and—although the course is difficult and the workload is heavy—those peers became an indispensable network of support in a challenging time. Moreover, from my perspective as an instructor, although I redesigned the class too substantially to warrant a meaningful quantitative comparison to previous iterations, I feel comfortable asserting that the quality of student work and engagement benefited from these interventions. Students seemed more comfortable keeping up with course deadlines (and communicating with me when they could not), and—while first draft submissions appeared to be of roughly the same caliber of previous classes—this group appeared to engage more deeply in the revision process in order to produce more effective final drafts. Perhaps a strong CoI provides students with enough support that they feel comfortable taking risks that may initially fail but ultimately result in better work.

Eyler concludes his notes on sociality's role in learning:

After reviewing so much of the literature on sociality and its effects on our teaching, our classrooms, and our students, I am going to go out on a precariously shaky limb and say that actually being in the same place matters a great deal for educational success as it allows for the full expression of our social nature as human beings. (107)

He continues, “Certainly, we can experience some social connections through all of these technological means, but whether the technology allows us to tap into our sociality enough to maximize learning is a very different question” (107). As education continues to shift online, maintaining a meaningful sense of classroom community will be crucial for the wellbeing of both teachers and learners. And, as post-pandemic face-to-face teaching returns, instructors can more fully understand the profound impact that sociality has on student learning, and translate and retain community-building practices—like community agreements, collaborative note taking and documentation, prioritizing social comfort in group work situations, and valuing quality of content over quantity—into developing a strong network of classroom bonds. The community of inquiry framework and flipped classroom models are two methods of creating that network poised for further experimentation and study.

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# Doing Archival Research from Home

LYNÉE LEWIS GAILLET

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Spring 2020 in the panic to “Keep Teaching,” I shifted a face-to-face class to online delivery for the first time. As a veteran teacher and past Writing Program Administrator, I managed to complete the course without too many bumps, but only because I co-taught with an accomplished collaborator—one who not only had experience designing hybrid courses, but who also offered unique perspectives on the subject matter. However, remote course delivery (what occurred mid-spring 2020) doesn’t equal thoughtful online teaching. Over the summer, like most everyone else in higher education, I relied heavily upon my institution’s Center for Excellence in Teaching, Learning, and Online Education. That instruction prepared me for the mechanics of going online but didn’t address my bigger dilemmas: refiguring a split-level course designed to meet the needs of undergraduates, MA, and PhD students, and incorporate experiential learning in archival research instruction (when I had never taught fully online). Furthermore, my ambitious course goals included introducing ways to unsettle and repatriate archives, build ground-up community archives, and collaborate with special collection librarians—all delivered from my kitchen table. This chapter reflects upon that course reconfiguration and modality, including perspectives from brave students who were both new to archival research and willing guinea pigs in this pedagogical experiment. Relying upon narrative and scholarship, we collectively suggest options for researching and writing with archives when materials aren’t physically accessible; discuss collaborations among embedded students and

community stakeholders as we embarked upon unique archival investigations; and explore how digital archival research can address claims that humanities scholarship doesn't take into account ongoing conversations in archival studies and other disciplines (Caswell). The final section suggests broader takeaways from the 2020 mandated shift to go online, reflecting upon how as a field faculty working across ranks now are poised to begin reexamining the role of contingent faculty (including graduate teaching assistants and part-time employees), adopting increased online conferencing practices, embracing hybrid curriculum designs in lieu of traditional in-person seminars, and incorporating public writing in advanced research courses.

I've taught writing classes grounded in archival research practices many times before, but this split-level course is new. The class is expanding to include a wider range of target archives, collaborations with librarians, and social justice/familial/community projects. The course design incorporates pluriversal ways to view, gather, collate, and understand archival materials and collections. So often we view archival collections (especially those housed in traditional spaces) as holding central truths. In the refigured class, we examine how primary materials might tell a wider range of stories juxtaposed with one another, particularly when artifacts are reconnected to their original communities and decoupled from institutional housing spaces. Normally, class assignments include site visits, digital archival projects, ethnographies, surveys, interviews, and reading responses.

As Chair of an English department, I sponsored graduate student/faculty co-teaching in 2018. This initiative was designed to offer PhD students opportunities to teach advanced undergraduate and graduate courses before going on the job market; however, this move proved to be particularly prescient given events of 2020. Jess Rose, a gifted teacher-scholar, and I were co-teaching (a different course) spring of 2020 when in March our university moved all classes online. Jess and I quickly adapted the remainder of the course for distance learning given the institutional mandates—a task made infinitely easier for me given Jess's online teaching experience, her intimate knowledge of the subject matter, and that she was already co-teaching the course. Over the summer we worked closely to design the born-digital archives class we would co-teach in the fall—a mutually-beneficial pedagogical project. Jess describes the experience below:

Collaborating to develop an online version of the archives class was exciting but presented unique challenges. I knew we had the right combination of ingredients: Lynée is my mentor, as I am a PhD candidate, and we have worked extensively together; we both feature archives in our scholarship and our pedagogy; and, although I have more digital experience, we both had invested time in getting comfortable with online class delivery. In fact, our recent conversations about archival work had previously included discussions of emerging scholarship around digital and community archives and our desire to adopt those materials in the classroom. We knew that past assignments—such as performing a

site visit or completing primary research in public—would be untenable and needed to be replaced with alternatives that would still contribute to knowledge-building and skills-building. So, when we sat down to revise the syllabus, we had a short list of things we knew we wanted to address. First, we updated and streamlined the texts to reflect foundational and current discussions surrounding archival research and scholarship, including texts addressing digital collections and critiques of collecting processes/subjects. We also folded in interdisciplinary conversations about archival research methods by archivists and feminist scholars, and added popular sources demonstrating the breadth of collection and keeping.

Second, we addressed the larger challenge of this course, digital delivery. Given the course is part workshop and part seminar, facetime is important for brainstorming and absorbing the material. From the prior semester, we learned that students are more productive and more firmly anchored to the class with synchronous interaction, so we restructured the three-hour class time to be just one hour-long, reserving two hours for research and individual instruction. Still, these meetings took a different shape and pace. In a face-to-face seminar, we would spend time with each text and bring in artifacts, documents, and speakers (and treats—never underestimate the pedagogy of the cookie); our virtual model required we shift to showcase websites, anecdotes, images, and guests. We invited archivists and archival researchers into our virtual space for conversations about their work, which helped students envision how they might conduct their own archival investigations.

Finally, pandemic restrictions meant reimagining assignments, as traditional primary research often involves public spaces. These restrictions became an opportunity to discuss, with ourselves and later with students, how context changes research: What does it mean to gather an oral history from afar? How do we frame and define “observation” in a digital paradigm? What do we lose (or gain) from engaging with digitized collections? What happens when what you need is not digitized? One misconception we needed to dispel is the idea that accessing digital archives is the same as accessing information in a search engine. Metadata, digitized contents, and procedures vary across digital archives and must still follow archival ethics. As Geoffrey Yeo notes, although it is not the case, users “assume that they will be able to access [entire collections] through a single interface” and download mix-and-matched contents to “assemble them into personal digital collections” (179). Encouraging good digital research practices meant highlighting the affordances and limitations of digital finding aids, digitized and digital collections, and access. Thus, the hierarchy of several assignments shifted: the site visit became an extended planning memo. Alternately, the digital collections assignment, originally a support exercise to assist students in understanding research options, became a feature assignment with more significant outcomes.

Regardless of course modality, the archival research class focuses on method and methodology, introducing protocols, issues, and steps for doing archival investigation—an approach initially difficult for some students to grasp. The readings, guest lectures, and case studies introduce how to do primary investigation, a range of ethical and methodological considerations associated with

this investigative practice, and the various forms and genres for writing up findings. Students self-select their projects and subjects for investigation based on communities to which they belong, access to primary materials, and personal experiences and interests. Many students relish the opportunity to assume the mantle of expert, the freedom to explore a topic of interest in greater detail or share their knowledge with larger audiences. For other students, however, this flexibility can be stifling, and they initially defer to traditional academic subjects associated with prior research (literature analysis, chronological periods of study, investigation of foundational figures, etc.). To address this difficulty in selecting a topic and to redirect students towards projects grounded in primary rather than secondary research, we require students to create preliminary memos that propose topics prior to each assignment. As the course went online, these memos became even more important, serving as a powerful heuristic as some students struggled at the outset of the course and were reticent to share their topic-selection confusion in class. In past in-person seminars, participants more readily discussed their difficulties in pinpointing a collection to analyze or subject to investigate, often engaging in collaborative or small-group brainstorming sessions to generate research trajectories for class projects. The spotlighted student anecdotes below illustrate the range of projects undertaken in the class and provide insightful commentary into ways going online augmented research opportunities.

Student Samantha Rae's narrative proves that issues of serendipity, artifact analysis, and investigations of family lore remain static, whether searching digitally or onsite. Beginning with an artifact (a letter in her possession), she extends her digital search to encompass traditional archival methods, such as Margaret J. Marshall's advice in "Looking for Letters," paired with investigations of online databases of archived ephemera.

So much of what I knew of my grandfather's Army service didn't come from him. Rather, my knowledge came from stories (rumors?) that had been passed down. When I stumbled upon a letter written by his mother in an effort to keep him from being sent to Vietnam, I finally had a feel for the reality of his experiences. I knew almost immediately that my final archival project would center on this letter in one way or another. As a novice to archival work, I struggled with the concept of allowing artifacts and archives to speak. I felt as though I needed a specific thesis and clear research trajectory. When that clear path became increasingly entangled, I began to notice a shift in my attitude toward the project. Instead of underscoring a larger issue within the context of my grandfather's story, I realized that I first actually needed to know his story. So, my project shifted to focus on constructing a personal history based on the artifacts in conjunction with familial stories/rumors, and inclusion of digitally-archived materials of soldiers whose stories closely match my grandfather's. What I found, then, was that the serendipity in constructing a narrative that was not my own attended to my original concern for a clear and prospective research path. My grandfather's narrative became more available the more it interacted with the narratives of other soldiers within the archives.

In the end, Samantha's personal quest leads to a larger understanding of a cultural phenomenon and provides an opportunity to augment existing digital collections, as Brenta Blevins suggests in "Teaching Digital Literacy Composing Concepts" (30).

Students often begin research projects by looking to the personal and then shifting to find ways to make the presentation of findings more universal. Paola Hernandez, for example, researched recent US Immigration processes and policy debates in great part because of her access to individuals intimately connected with this crisis. She wanted to investigate policies and security measures designed to ban immigration, but the scope of this project proved too daunting. Instead, she adapted her final project to include a history of green cards based on digitized materials, including letters and legislation. She undergirded this search by conducting oral histories with personal contacts and family members to gather border crossing narratives. Paola explains:

In this project I drew upon the history of permanent resident cards as well as interviews with local permanent residents to learn about their experience crossing the border and applying for residency. I argued the US's racially motivated institutions like ICE and border control have been a bureaucratic attempt to construct an exploitive labor system and communal violence to clear the way for "real" Americans. However, accessibility to reliable records was the hurdle that drove my project in this direction. Initially, I wanted to interview people who were held in detention centers and use learned information to guide me towards [records] like medical, warnings/reprimands, and arrests that could corroborate their stories. However, I could not get people to talk virtually about their experiences and experienced a lack of trust. Not being able to meet in person was difficult because we could not establish the personal connection that one needs when handling such private and traumatic matters. Additionally, [obtaining] records that prove custodial negligence is a tedious act because it is highly unlikely that institutions like I.C.E. or the police department would release incriminating documents to civilians, even though their websites claim transparency. To submit a claim access to the records, I needed approval from the persons I could not interview.

Paola's class experiences echo the struggles of many other students: their enthusiasm for the archival research potential and topic outpaces what is possible within the confines of a single term. Archival research can be painstakingly slow; instead of submitting completed/tidy projects at the end of the term, students turn in projects in medias res alongside a reflection and plan for next steps and future research directions. Despite the limitations imposed by the online format, in many ways, going online helped facilitate keeping projects focused and doable; students were limited to readily available resources.

Jim Nelson, who researched presidential addresses, shares how the online archival research experience defied other expectations—sensory ones. The course always included digital research and we read scholarship addressing online search

methods; however, the transition to fully digital inquiry further emphasized the significance of triangulating findings and the need for deep web searching.

Doing archival research in the middle of a pandemic had its challenges. I had imagined physically opening a box of papers and/or ephemera once owned by the person I was researching, diving deep into their life, and personally connecting with them by touching something they had touched. Unfortunately, most [physical] archives were closed in 2020, and even those that were accessible, I did not want to enter for safety reasons. When we read Enoch and VanHaitsma's "Archival Literacy: Reading the Rhetoric of Digital Archives in the Undergraduate Classroom," I realized even if I could not go to a location and touch housed items, I could still "see" them online. Obviously, there are some drawbacks as Gaillet and Eble state, "[T]he materials aren't in 3D; you can't ascertain the true color, shape, size and even smell of materials . . ." (13), and as I found, you can't trust everything you read on the Internet. Getting to the truth still requires deep investigation. Unfortunately, many archives do not have digitized holdings, but the items I needed were held by the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and various Presidential Libraries, which do. I found four versions of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, one of which was the "official" speech he delivered. But I also found copies in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Evening Star* (published the day after) that included the complete speech transcribed on site; the newspapers agreed with each other but differed slightly from the "official" version. Likewise, the Parks Department's National Historic Site has a version on its website of James Garfield's speech dedicating Arlington Cemetery. However, when I dove deeper, I found the original speech on the Library of Congress website, and it is much longer than the version posted by the Parks Department, which left out Garfield's views on racial justice. And a YouTube video of FDR's "Day of Infamy" speech seemed to have been spliced. Digging deeper into FDR's Presidential Library's digitized records confirmed that suspicion; I found a video copy of the entire speech. We can do archival research without leaving the comfort of home, but are limited by what is available digitally, and we still need to do the hard work to find digitized originals, not just accept what even a seemingly "official site" tells us is authentic.

Jim's research experiences reflect issues associated with reliability in collation and digitization practices. Narrative omission can occur when archival holdings aren't corroborated, and public erasure or misrepresentation of rhetorical activities may result from redacting, truncating, and tampering with archival holdings.

Dylan Maroney looked to interviewing to corroborate and expand his online findings as he sought to contextualize a set of digitized photos from the 1958 Atlanta Temple bombing. While most oral histories are gathered from first-person witnesses to an event, Dylan found that he had to take a different approach for both historical and contemporary reasons: many eye witnesses he sought had passed away, and quarantine measures limited access to living participants. Serendipitously, this situation suggested a new research slant—rather than providing an historical snapshot of the event, he instead began investigating how the local community became a center for social justice following the bombing.

Investigating archives without access to physical records—especially in cases where the records that would be most helpful were interned in museums and closed to the public—was a bit daunting. The pandemic and ensuing move to digital classroom spaces required a different form of investigation, one that stepped away from concrete records and instead allowed the evidence of lived experience and oral histories to corroborate the fleeting evidence that was available. In “Keeping The Conversation Going: The Archive Thrives on Interviews And Oral History,” Brad E. Lucas and Margaret M. Strain concede that “[o]ral historians also faced charges—not without merit—that their work was flawed in terms of subjectivity, reliability, and validity” (259). These issues also posed concerns for my research, as I questioned the reliability and validity of physical vs. digital archival sources. I researched the historic temple bombing in Atlanta. While the Senior Rabbi at the time of the bombings had long since passed away, I followed the line of successors down to interview Senior Rabbi Berg both to account for an alternative view of archival holdings and to corroborate findings. I consulted photos documenting the bombing that shook the Jewish community of Atlanta, but the interview offered a 70-year trajectory of the community post-event, one focused on leadership and social justice. Finding alternative pathways for my research pushed and pulled me in directions that I hadn’t planned, which provided not only the necessary evidence to address subjectivity, reliability, and validity of my research, but also further demonstrated the value of collaborating with community stakeholders.

Dylan’s class experiences represent typical ones characterizing the archival class. Wanting to safely stay on traditional research paths, he initially planned to examine the work of 18th-century rhetor Mary Astell. After immersing himself in the readings and class discussions, Dylan sought a research topic connected to his personal identity, local community, and the current cultural moment. The result is a very different historical project, one directed by events and circumstances associated with 2020.

And Jessie McCrary used ethnography to immerse herself within another kind of digital research collaboration. She fully embraced her constraints, connecting virtual space with physical space in an ethnography that observed both physical and digital behaviors in a professional context. This project demonstrates the possibilities of digital primary research, whereby digital is not only a medium for research, but also a context.

What does ethnography work look like in a global pandemic? My course project comprised methods and questions informed by digital space and online learning. To conduct an digital ethnography, I observed performance, patterns, and virtual movements of an Atlanta-based designer and business owner as she worked through two afternoons of “typical workdays”; additionally, I sat nearby to observe her behaviors on-screen, asking questions where appropriate. The subject, a friend in another field working from home, took easily to narrating actions as she performed them, and we took conscious effort to formalize the experience.

I wanted to observe how a self-employed professional uses the instant-messaging program Slack to communicate across projects, partners and clients, and social groups throughout a workday. How often did she check it, for what purpose, and how did this program affect the creative process of her design work? I captured two afternoons that demonstrated the sheer number of programs she swapped among to perform her job. While she was indeed task-switching frequently, it was not due to the instant messaging platform. Much of our existing knowledge on communication platforms and labor comes from scholars in psychology and technical and professional communication. Researchers have considered communication across teams and projects (Cameron and Webster); boredom, distraction, and decorum (Whitty and Carr); the use of emoticons in task-oriented communication in the workplace (Luor et al.); and the impact of these platforms on perception of creativity and productivity (Oldham and Da Silva; Zaman et al.; Wang et al.). My project adds to this research by showing the potential for studying “instant” and other communication behaviors in modern creative business, female-owned small businesses, and a “workplace” highly modified by exclusively working from home. This ethnography highlighted the potential of studying the rhetorical situation in fully digital, instant-by-design spaces, with implications for creativity, focus, and fatigue in modern work. My ethnography followed these same lines of inquiry *due* to similar limitations—as a student enrolled in a course that was supposed to be in-person. Instead, the “space” I explored was digital, and that starting point drove new and important questions to investigate via digital ethnography.

These beautiful student projects represent the potential inherent in online archival and primary investigations, and their experiences offer a multitude of possibilities for revisiting course designs. I’ve encouraged students to continue their research beyond the confines of the term, and we are sharing our experiences and projects at a regional conference roundtable, fall 2021.

## TAKEAWAYS

While migration to online teaching has been a possibility for some time, resistant faculty, departments, and institutions now have moved past considering this pedagogy as second-class, no longer balking at the necessary teacher and student training needed to gear up for online pedagogy. Post 2020, creating a cadre of hybrid, blended, online, and in-person course modalities is realistic for most departments. The necessary slash-and-burn situation we faced in spring 2020 swiftly addressed obstacles and cleared mental space for immediately going online—to ensure our own economic survival. By quieting long-touted arguments against teaching in digital environments and integrating thoughtful, student-centered pedagogical considerations, we now have both impetus and interest in exploring the possibilities inherent in digital teaching—post pandemic. After being a part of this forced



migration to online teaching, I have more general takeaways, in addition to those addressing specific course redesign:

- The emergency shift to online learning resulted in a mad-dash search for technology advice addressing existing course migration; subsequently, forward-thinking teachers are seeking reliable and thoughtful scholarship, like projects shepherded by Jessie Borgman and Casey McArdle—*The Online Writing Instruction Community* (2015), a free online collection of resources for teachers and administrators; *Personal, Accessible, Responsive, Strategic: Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instructors* (2019); and *PARS in Practice: More Strategies and Resources for Online Writing Instructors* (2021). These two experienced teacher-scholars have amassed materials, ideas, and justifications for online teaching. Their beautiful work is humanistic and invitational, intended for new and veteran teachers. In future class designs (regardless of course mode), I will revisit SoTL that incorporates digital design principles in order to better meet student needs.
- In my split-level class, graduate students rated the success of the course higher, while undergraduates, for the most part, were less engaged. In hindsight, perhaps I should have encouraged students to turn on video when we met synchronously. Given the difficulties facing students who were forced to take virtual classes (anxiety, homeschooling conflicts, technology issues, privacy concerns, Zoom fatigue, etc.), I was disinclined to require video presence; yet, students participated more (and, yes, I called on them more often) when their video was active. In retrospect, I wish I had offered suggestions for joining class that included practical, conferencing platform instructions and offered increased options for blurring backgrounds, chat, joining with audio, and using nonverbal reaction features.
- The necessity of finding ways to meet with students provided one of the strengths of the move to online instruction, particularly in the archival research class. Arranging convenient times for in-person office visits is often trying at an urban campus given transportation issues, the conflicting demands upon non-traditional students, and in my case the unpredictable schedule of a department chair. The pandemic presented new scheduling challenges. Using the sequenced project memos as a meeting tool heuristic, I began holding virtual office hours and relied upon short meetings and phone conversations to discuss research questions and problems. Often these WebEx meetings and phone chats occurred outside official (and often limited) office hours given that we were all working from home. The video/audio conferencing, discussion of work in progress, and feedback/assessment of drafts proved to be one of the most fruitful components in the online class. In-line with research and findings of scholars such as Anna

Grigoryan, I found that “the use of a combination of audiovisual and text-based commentary in online writing courses was more effective in promoting substantive revision and improvement in students’ writing than the use of text-based commentary alone” (451). Since the majority of students were completely unfamiliar with archival research prior to class, all assignment topics were self-selected based on students’ interests and access to community and digitized holdings, and students had limited opportunity for meeting with special collection librarians, the individualized meetings and 1:1 discussions were crucial. Going forward, I will keep successful meeting and responding features learned from this experience.

- Looking beyond mere coping strategies that characterized 2020 teaching—as I now move classes online, adopt a hybrid format, or include more digital learning opportunities for in-person instruction—I will shift traditional writing about archives assignments to include increased public, online writing. By embedding student researchers working within local archives, they may find ways to publicly disseminate their findings. Pre-planning with librarians and collectors will allow for mutually-beneficial community projects whereby students can help catalog and create digital finding aids for unprocessed materials, write blog posts that spotlight holdings and suggest paths for innovative primary research, and learn to conduct and post oral histories.
- Finally, as a past department chair, I hope that post-2020 awareness encourages administrators and scholars to address more broadly the isolation often felt by part-time teachers, particularly those hired last minute to address enrollment shifts. As Theresa M. Evans explains, “The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the difficulties of transitioning the on-ground class to online, but ‘just-in-time’ courses are nothing new for contingent faculty. Last-minute course assignments are ‘par for the course’ for those who are contingent and teach online, despite numerous arguments against such practices” (168). At my large, urban campus, last minute hires are routine and disruptive for both teachers and programmatic initiatives dependent upon intensive teacher training and predicated course designs. The national increased reliance upon contingent faculty, decrease in tenure track jobs, and greater demand for first year writing courses resulting from high Drop/Failure/Withdrawal rates during the pandemic will only exacerbate this situation. The now shared faculty experiences of the stress that comes with last-minute course modality shifts and rapid course design demands may lead to increased empathy across ranks/administration and clearer understandings of curricular/faculty needs.

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# Avoiding Zoom Doom: Creating Online Workshops with Design Thinking

LANCE CUMMINGS

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I'm sure 2020 will forever be remembered as “the year of the Zoom” ... among other things, of course. Many of us made the assumption “going online” meant going video. Or if we didn't make that assumption, our institutions did.

The ubiquitous use of synchronous video chat<sup>1</sup> since 2020 may create the sense that a space like Zoom is the only way to do synchronous classes. In reality, scholars have been studying synchronous writing instruction online for three decades, from chatrooms to whiteboards, to audio (Hewett). Distance education has been around for over a century, though mostly relying on asynchronous means. For example, one of the first recorded instances of distant education dates back to an early mail-based program in 1830s Sweden (Cunningham 592). Two-way, synchronous communication did not become available until the invention of fiber optics in the 1980s (593).

The invention of Web 2.0 technologies has now made two-way communication the norm for both students and instructors, allowing for more expansive learning networks. With the pandemic of 2020, though, video chat technologies became not just normal but essential. Video chat spaces like Zoom certainly offer affordances not available in older technologies, like our ability to see nonverbal forms of communications. We've quickly discovered that these affordances can also turn into constraints.

No doubt, using video conferencing to create virtual classrooms has been playing an important role in higher education for over a decade. From 2012–2014,

I piloted some of Miami University's first summer online writing courses, making use of Google Hangouts for the first time ... mostly as a space for conferencing and workshopping. Our class discussion was still asynchronous in Google+, which was Google's failed attempt to compete with Facebook in the arena of social media (see Cummings et al.). One might think that I was prepared for the infamous "pivot" online ... but I was not.

Currently, I mostly teach either asynchronous online, face-to-face or a blend of the two. Since arriving at the University of North Carolina Wilmington in 2014, rarely have I taught in a video classroom. I've had international guest speakers visit via video in Webex classrooms (now Zoom classrooms). I've done peer review and workshops in the occasional video meetings. But most of my online writing courses are asynchronous. If I'm going to lecture (which I don't much), why not just record it and allow students to watch it on their own time and save us all the hassle of a video meeting?

But as the pandemic struck, I was teaching or scheduled to teach several courses planned to be in-person, in a face-to-face classroom. My document design course relies heavily on computer lab workshops to help students work through the complexities of Adobe design software. Asynchronous versions of this class can work for some students, but certainly not all. I was also teaching an Honors class and University Studies 101 class, which don't even allow online versions because building community face-to-face is one of the primary outcomes for these programs. Being physically proximate is a fundamental element of these classes.

To complicate things, my Honors class focused on design thinking and the art of problem-solving. As you will learn in this chapter, design thinking workshops center on highly interactive conferences that usually leverage physical proximity and space to increase engagement afforded in conference rooms and spaces. The whole point is to get a bunch of stakeholders in the same room to explore and play around with ideas!

In short, I was not prepared for what I am calling "Zoom Doom," an extreme version of "Zoom fatigue." This is the dread that comes from the realization that you have yet another terrible Zoom class for the day. I want to argue that Zoom Doom is mostly an instructor phenomenon. Yes, students get Zoom fatigue ... maybe more so than instructors. But instructors must face the idea of managing and coordinating a class of Zoom-fatigued students, many of whom may not be interested in the first place.

In this chapter, I will outline the elements that lead to Zoom Doom and demonstrate how activities and workshops from design thinking can be adapted to Zoom contexts to make synchronous online instruction more interactive. Though some of these relate to Zoom fatigue, how the dynamic plays out with instructors requires new ways of thinking about these digital spaces.

## BLACK SCREENS OF DEATH

In the Fall of 2020, a fellow faculty used the words “black screens of death” to describe the depressed feeling of teaching to a screen full of dark boxes in his Zoom class. His classes had evolved into lectures at blank inactive screens. Was anyone even there?

This struck me because my Zoom classes were going quite well, especially my Honors writing class on design thinking. Additionally, I had observed amazingly interactive Zoom workshops among my research and community partnerships.

Obviously, our reluctance to require students to have video online complicates these dynamics, bringing up issues of privacy, accessibility, and equity (Finders and Muñoz). A business colleague of mine recounted an experience that she had with a consultant her firm hired. This consultant told everyone to turn their cameras on or leave the meeting.

“If you don’t have the time or interest to turn on your video and engage with everyone on the call, then why are you even here?”

That seems harsh, but consultants cost a lot of money and their time is usually valuable. This kind of response is generally not an option in the classroom, but clearly illustrates the value that professionals put on video screens in remote meetings, especially remote workshops that require interaction. If you are not invested in the success of a workshop, then why bother even showing up? The time of instructors and student peers is as valuable as any consultant when building important knowledge in the classroom. Learning how to make that time in the Zoom room valuable is key to avoiding Zoom Doom.

We shouldn’t waste students’ valuable time and attention on unnecessary Zoom meetings. All too often, we assume “going online” simply means “uploading” our previous versions of face-to-face classes somewhere on the internet, usually in a Learning Management System (LMS) like Canvas or Blackboard. In terms of synchronous lectures, this means simply giving the same lecture you gave in the classroom in Zoom. If the pandemic hasn’t broken this assumption for you, then nothing will. But it is important to realize that these pedagogical shifts apply to the Zoom classroom as well.

Subjecting students to an hour lecture in Zoom or even as a recorded video simply won’t work in most cases and increases Zoom fatigue for all involved. I would argue that having students simply discuss for a Zoom meeting (like discussion-based classes) isn’t going to work unless you have highly invested students. Theoretically, using breakout rooms can better simulate techniques like “pair and share” that serve as catalysts for student discussion, but this is not a given and often requires professors to rotate through the groups, increasing our own cognitive load.

So, what is it about Zoom that makes these transitions difficult? And how can we adapt our teaching practices to account for these difficulties? Understanding “Zoom Doom” is key to changing our perceptions of the Zoom meeting space.

## WHAT IS ZOOM DOOM?

What exactly causes Zoom Doom and that constant dread we have of teaching to blank screens or blank faces? Certainly, Zoom fatigue on both ends of the classroom is the most important element to consider. Zoom provides the illusion of a common space—hey, we are all in the Zoom room—while also flattening all the information channels that we use within physical shared settings.

One of the primary affordances of the classroom is having a shared space where people can more easily share information, but also create strong connections through what is often called *phatic communication* (Porter 174). In essence, shared settings allow people to see and hear each other, providing additional information feedback like facial expressions, hand gestures, and voice. Zoom creates the illusion that we share a space—or maybe creates an additional shared space—but in reality, there are now multiple unshared spaces, creating psychological distance that is often difficult to discern or easy to ignore. Theoretically, Zoom is a shared setting where we can interact in physical ways, but the video screen flattens those interactions.

We might imagine the different levels of physical interaction as layers of skin. In “Understanding Zoom Fatigue,” Robby Nadler breaks down these layers of information into three skins.

- *The first skin is our body.* We share information non-verbally, using gestures, facial expressions, race, ethnicity, size, age, etc. When I walk into any classroom, students instantly know many things about me. I’m white, middle-aged. Nonverbal signals, like smiles and nods, often communicate a more informal approach to class. I also know a lot about students’ backgrounds and level of interest through observation.
- *The second skin is our clothes.* We share information by what we wear. A tie and button-up shirt indicates formal rank, whereas wearing a T-shirt communicates informality.
- *The third skin is the space that we inhabit.* In the physical classroom, I might write messages on the whiteboard. I often lean or sit on the desk (instead of using the podium), to communicate informality. We might move the desks around to communicate our goal for class discussion. (13)



Spaces like Zoom flatten everything into third skins without further distinction. Though information from the first and second skins appear in our Zoom windows, all of this information is now a part of our third space. Each person in a Zoom meeting inhabits their own space within which the Zoom space exists. When interacting in Zoom, we may think that our physical, nonverbal cues are being read, but they are much harder to see and interpret. This conflation of space is a primary cause of Zoom fatigue. We think that we are sharing a space where our interactions are connecting, but they are often not. This flattening causes several problems that we sometimes do not attend to as instructors or students.

Having class in a space like Zoom creates new obstacles to participation that are not immediately visible. Muted microphones and technological limits like internet speed inhibit accessibility to interaction (Oittinen 5). These factors, along with ambiguous gaze direction, also make smooth turn-taking a challenge (Halvorsen; Hjustad; Seuren et al.). In other words, we can see all the participants at once, but we really don't know who or what they are looking at. These elements weaken what researchers call the "performative significance" of nonverbal behavior (Melander Bowden and Svahn). Our nonverbal communication is flattened because all our gestures and expressions seem to be equally significant (or insignificant). This leads to several important pedagogical challenges unique to Zoom.

- *Multi-tasking is inevitable:* Because all our spaces come together in our devices, Zoom invites multitasking. Why not check email, while in the Zoom meeting? Because human presence is flattened, the time or activity spent in Zoom seems less important. Additionally, participating in Zoom itself requires multi-tasking (Nadler 9). To fully participate in Zoom, you must manage the program, the chat room, screen sharing, the view of participants, etc. There simply is more work being in a Zoom meeting, and yet we compound this by attempting to multitask in other ways.
- *Everyone has their own third skin:* We also have to manage our third skin — or the space that we inhabit while in a Zoom (Nadler 9). Any change in our environment immediately changes the spatial parameters for our meeting — but not necessarily for others in the Zoom. If a cat or roommate walks into the room, we must immediately adapt.
- *Stimulation causes fight or flight response:* Participating in a Zoom meeting requires more strain than a typical face-to-face meeting. Excess of unfamiliar stimuli and constantly looking for those nonverbal clues with multiple participants crammed up against the screen requires constant alertness and increases cognitive load. (Basu; Sklar)

All this is worsened when students turn their cameras off. Human visual elements certainly flatten during Zoom meetings, but they disappear completely when

video feeds are blank. Yet, somehow we are expecting a higher level of interaction because Zoom promises this kind of space. Many have debated the pros and cons of requiring students to leave cameras on, but leaving them off completely changes the dynamic of any Zoom meeting.

Ultimately, Zoom is not a collaborative space, though it seems like it should be. Since participants are constantly splitting their attention (even if they are not multitasking), Zoom ultimately silos participants. For example, Van Braak et al. found that once a conversation does start in Zoom, it is usually difficult for anyone else to join in. Certainly, there are ways instructors can alleviate some of these problems, especially when we lay out the ground rules for Zoom meetings at the very beginning. Participants in the study used three practices to reframe participation:

- Self-selection through unmuting
- Using chat
- Teacher's explicit moderation

Relying on the teacher's moderation adds stress to this role and is not always helpful (15). These are all good practices but often feel like a band-aid applied to a larger wound.

As I worked through my new Zoom classes, I decided to apply ideas from design thinking, one of the courses I was teaching, to reimagine the entire idea of a Zoom class.

## DESIGN THINKING AND THE WRITING WORKSHOP

While implementing design thinking methodologies into my writing classrooms, I discovered that many of these workshop strategies helped alleviate my sense of Zoom Doom by integrating deeper and more diverse interactions into the synchronous online classroom.

At its core, design thinking is a process for creative problem-solving that relies on workshops to cultivate innovation among project teams. The main goal of design thinking is to approach complex problems from a human-centered perspective, which means including as many perspectives as possible. For design thinking specialists, this also means getting many perspectives in the same room to build new ideas and connections. The best solutions are collaborative ones.

Though understanding the entire design thinking framework is not necessary for this chapter, seeing the entire process is helpful when thinking about applying workshop techniques to the writing classroom. Every problem goes through a process of five steps:

- *Empathize*. Getting to know stakeholders and understanding the human side of a problem.
- *Define*. Re-defining a complex problem using empathy or human-centered research.
- *Ideate*. Brainstorming possible solutions to a re-defined problem.
- *Prototype*. Creating something rough that can be tested.
- *Test*. Sharing prototype with real people for feedback.
- *Repeat*. You repeat this process until you've got an idea that is creative and feasible!

The most common introduction to design thinking is a wallet activity where participants try to imagine and create a prototype of a new wallet that solves a specific problem for their assigned partner. Participants:

- *Interview* their partner to truly understand what need a wallet must feel for them
- *Redefine* the problem that a wallet is meant to solve
- *Brainstorm* many possible solutions
- *Prototype* their wallet using craft supplies
- *Test* their prototype with their partner

Most writing instructors will note a strong resemblance to the writing process (Purdy 268). In “Using Design Thinking to Teach Creative Problem-Solving in Writing Courses,” Scott Wible notes how the design thinking process helps students think more deeply about problems, but also teaches them how writing creates ideas through innovative kinds of workshop writing. Design thinking uses its genres and heuristics to generate new ideas through writing. Participants write and connect their writing with each other throughout any design thinking workshop.

You can see how this process might be difficult in Zoom. In classes, we were still in the classroom and managed to do most of the steps socially distanced. But when we moved online, any tools or activities had to be moved to digital spaces.

To understand how design thinking can transform our Zoom classes, these steps are less important than how design thinking uses workshops to cultivate more interaction among participants through hands-on activities. One of the greatest powers of design thinking is creating a separate time and space where all participants can focus on a problem more deeply. Participants need to be co-present and able to physically write and create things together.

Typically, workshops can last anywhere from 2 hours to a full week and are held in spacious rooms with lots of blank walls or whiteboards for taking notes or applying sticky notes (see Figure 1). Relying on physical interaction makes design



Fig. 7.1. Design Sprint workshop in Switzerland with the team of Design Sprint Ltd  
 Source: Design Sprint Ltd – [www.design-sprint.com](http://www.design-sprint.com) (Steph Cruchon, Egle Cruchon, Paul Van der Linden)

thinking workshops difficult to do online—one of the primary issues I ran into when I had to move my Honors class on design thinking to Zoom.

Design thinking consultants have adapted well to our new remote working situation by incorporating more tools into their Zoom space, for example, digital whiteboards and magic paper backgrounds (Stevens). Remote workshops still ask participants to use their own sticky notes for initial brainstorming, even though many of these eventually end up on a digital whiteboard. To illustrate how I used these techniques in my classroom, I'll first introduce you to a more detailed example of what a workshop looks like for a design thinker.

## EXAMPLE OF DESIGN THINKING WORKSHOP: LIGHTNING DECISION JAM

The Lightning Decision Jam (LDJ), or sometimes called the sailboat exercise, is one of the most popular design thinking workshops. This activity usually lasts around 40 minutes and provides structure to meetings that help avoid “never-ending discussions,” according to AJ&Smart’s workshop booklet, *The Workshopper Playbook* (Courtney 27). This works well for an online class because it fits into the usual timeframe, but rather than avoiding “never-ending talk,” this exercise helps avoid never-ending silence in the writing classroom.

To set up the activity, draw a sailboat on a whiteboard and give each student a stack of sticky notes. Have a topic for students to explore. The sailboat represents the topic. The sail indicates positives (things that move the ship forward) and the anchor signifies challenges (things that hold the boat back). This works particularly well for identifying challenges, solving problems, and making decisions.

For example, I've used this activity (adapted from Courtney) to find a complex problem for the class to research, and also to debrief peer review.

1. Give students 4 minutes to brainstorm all the things that are going well. They should write as many ideas as possible, one per sticky note.
2. Have students place at least 3–4 stickies on the whiteboard above the waterline. Ideally, each student should get a moment to briefly share their sticky notes. Discussion is discouraged. Students should just listen as others present, so that everyone gets a say.
3. Repeat step 2, but this time with problems, and the sticky notes go below the waterline.
4. Prioritize problems that need to be solved by having each student vote for their favorite sticky notes with a small dot. Each student gets 3 votes. They can vote more than once per sticky note, and they can vote for their own.
5. Take the most voted-for sticky note and redefine the problem by finishing the sentence “How might we...?”
6. Now have students brainstorm as many solutions as possible by writing one per sticky note. All these go up on a blank whiteboard.
7. Prioritize solutions again by having students vote, as in step 4.

Though LDJ usually has participants use an impact/effort matrix to prioritize the most voted solutions, you can also stop here and discuss the various solutions or even choose the most popular sticky (Courtney 43–52). At first glance, this seems impossible to do in a Zoom classroom, but really all an instructor or facilitator needs to do is create a new shared space. That is all a whiteboard is in the conference room.

## USING DIGITAL WHITEBOARDS

I began integrating one of the more popular digital whiteboards into my writing classes, using them to brainstorm ideas and collect more diverse perspectives for discussion (see Figure 2 for an example template). Though most of these whiteboards allow for many kinds of activity, the key feature I used the most was the ability for participants to create, move, and organize sticky notes within a specific frame.

Introducing a workshop space into the Zoom classroom creates a new participation framework that helps drive the purpose of the class, vents flattened space issues inherent in Zoom, and gives everyone a deliverable for the work they've done.

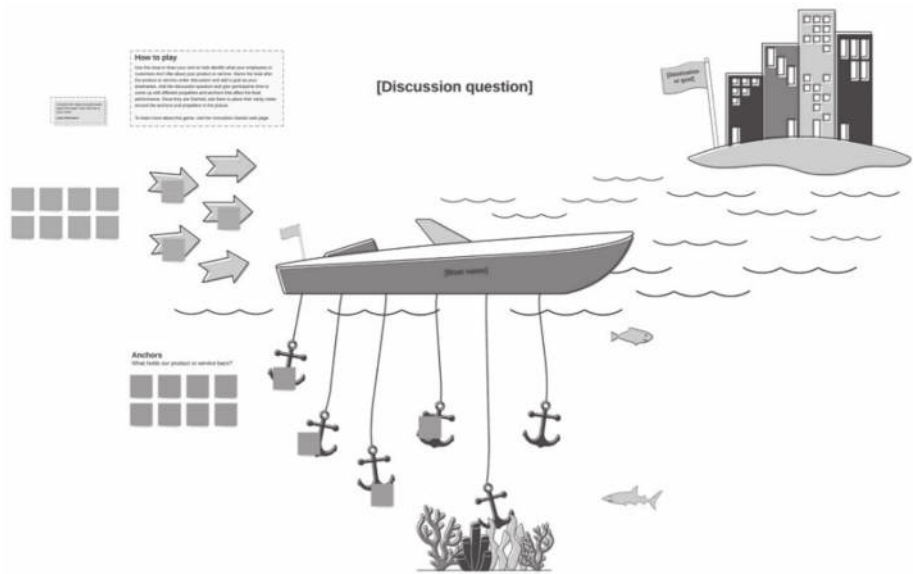


Figure 7.2. Lightning Decision Jam Template for LucidSpark Digital Whiteboard

Source: Created in Lucidspark.

I found incorporating design thinking workshops with Miro provided a more defined purpose for coming into the Zoom space. The focus was no longer what was going on (or not going on) in Zoom. Introducing a “fourth space” into the Zoom classroom helped eliminate many of the issues causing Zoom Doom:

- *Provides structure:* Workshops added structure to classroom activities. Most workshops have strict time limits, and digital whiteboards allow everyone to see the agenda and purpose right next to the activity space. Using PowerPoints and polls in Zoom certainly can do this in your traditional Zoom lecture or class, but for the most part, these still maintain both psychological and social distance between students and instructors.
- *Provides an alternative focal point:* Now instead of staring at each other, or even themselves (a major source of Zoom fatigue), everyone is looking at the digital whiteboard. Though the discussion is certainly encouraged at different points of the workshop, there is no pressure to talk ... and there are now many ways to be heard.
- *Emphasizes teacher’s facilitative role:* Though the teacher or workshop leader certainly sets the agenda, their goal is to facilitate, not to dispense information or even moderate a discussion.

- *Keeps things moving:* Design thinking workshops move fast. Each activity has strict time limits ... even as short as 4 minutes. These activities also alternate between individual, group, and whole classwork. The time spent solely looking at Zoom video ... or even working in the class space is limited. Participants don't have to sustain intense attention for long periods of time.

Drawbacks do come with incorporating workshops in this way. Cognitive overload can gum up the class schedule, especially as students acquaint themselves with the new technology. I try to keep the tasks as simple as possible. It is important to “onboard” students by either assigning them a tutorial or giving a short demo at the beginning of each workshop/class. Often I like to start with a simple icebreaker that lets them use Miro for a lower-stakes activity and allows me to address any confusion about the space right off the bat.

## STRATEGIES FOR AVOIDING ZOOM DOOM

Though I love using the Miro board and the focused interaction it brings to the Zoom classroom, instructors don't necessarily need to incorporate this new technology to get the same effect. Re-imagining a fourth space outside the Zoom can be enough. Research shows that introducing any new tools to our teaching context, especially if they nudge students to participate, can improve student interaction (see Porter et al.).

In short, what creates Zoom fatigue is our desperate need to interact non-verbally, the illusion that video chat can fulfill that need, and the feeling of emptiness when this doesn't happen. This dynamic is worse for writing instructors because this interaction is the very thing we are looking for when we bring students into any classroom. Thus, Zoom Doom.

Considering the research, the solution may be simple: ignore or stop looking for nonverbal clues in Zoom and lower our expectations for what a space like Zoom can do for us.

Thinking now about the webinars that I've enjoyed the most in my professional life, the video was often shut off for all participants, except the facilitator. Everyone else participated in the chat. At times, participants might be invited to turn on their screen to share, but the facilitator isn't looking for nonverbal cues. They are reading the chat and interacting with the posts. Participants have only one screen to decipher, rather than a gallery of participants (or a video of themselves). For whatever reason, University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW) does not allow this kind of configuration in our Zoom classrooms.

I ask students without screens to participate in the chat to varying success, but I eventually figured out that simply holding the occasional class synchronously in a chat room (like Microsoft Teams) promotes more profound engagement. To be seen, students have to interact one way or another. Or I just tell everyone to turn off their screens and start a chat. Blank screens can nudge students into a fourth space with different kinds of interactions.

If you would like to integrate design thinking styled workshops, you should keep in mind key practices that professionals have developed while adapting to the remote environments during the pandemic (AJ&Smart):

- *Increase onboarding time:* You will need to spend time introducing students to whichever workshop space you decide to use. Assigning an introduction with a tutorial before class will make sure everyone is familiar with the tool, even if they are having difficulties.
- *Organize your workshop space:* Though I find running workshops more fun and easy to do, they do take considerable time to prepare. Whatever interaction space you want to use should be set up with clearly designated interaction spaces. Just as you might bring supplies to your classroom or prep your whiteboard for an activity, you should do the same for this space. Any instructional material should be in the same space. Don't make participants flip between more than two spaces (Zoom and Miro, for example).
- *Intentionally organize windows:* Most workshop facilitators recommend using two monitors (one for Zoom and one for the interactive space). Obviously, this is not possible for everyone, so they recommend splitting your single monitor in two—1/3 Zoom, 2/3 interaction space. Notice how this de-emphasizes the Zoom space.
- *Estimate your time...and double it:* The most repeated advice that I hear from workshop facilitators is to double the amount of time you think it will take. Normally, I might schedule an initial icebreaker as 15 minutes. In all my workshops, 30 minutes worked best. Keep plenty of buffer space and consider adding short breaks.

I usually try to keep things as simple as possible, especially at the beginning of the class. In Figure 7.3, you can see an example of what a board might look like when trying to define a specific problem by looking at it from different angles. In this case, students are considering problems that international students might have adjusting to life at UNCW. Creating a board like this requires several kinds of activities. Students brainstorm on their own, share ideas, work in groups to categorize or develop ideas, and make connections with the whole class. The interaction required to create this board is often quite fun and only relies partly on Zoom.



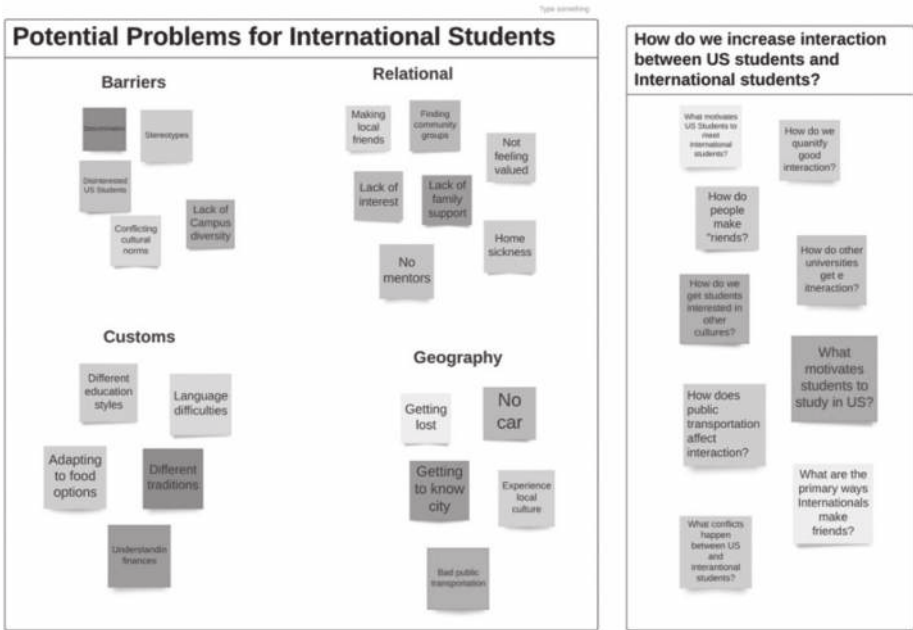


Figure 7.3. Example Problem Board  
 Source: Created in Lucidspark

## CONCLUSION

It turns out that Zoom Doom isn't really caused by blank screens or Zombie student faces. Quite simply, we spend too much time in video chats ... and expecting too much from that time. This doesn't mean video classrooms are ineffective or unnecessary, but that we can't base our use of Zoom off the metaphor of a face-to-face classroom. The amount of effort to sustain attention in Zoom increases and what we can glean from that attention decreases. Though students often complain about multiple platforms in an online classroom, understanding Zoom meetings as more three-dimensional where students can alternate between spaces without getting distracted is key to sustaining a Zoom teaching environment.

Though I understand that not all teachers are ready to incorporate or train themselves on a new tool like Miro, anyone can take the workshop principles observed in these spaces and implement them in different ways. We often complain about the physical constraints of our face-to-face classroom. In many ways, treating Zoom like a workshop space frees us from those constraints. A digital whiteboard has nearly infinite space. Chat spaces easily record student participation and allow time for slow thinkers to respond. Approaching the Zoom

classroom as an interactive, workshop space not only alleviates Zoom Doom. New forms of collaboration can also bring exciting discoveries and interaction.

## NOTE

1 I have obtained Institutional Research Board approval to quote directly from students' work completed throughout the course. Per the conditions of that approval, I use pseudonyms throughout the chapter.

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# Expressive Arts Curriculum in Online Writing Courses

PEACHES HASH

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Before the COVID-19 pandemic, to say I was a reluctant online writing instructor would be an understatement. Each year, I listened to colleagues discuss successes with online learning, believing that my curriculum was meant solely for in-person courses. For years, my undergraduate Rhetoric and Composition courses have been themed around Expressive Arts. Expressive Arts are methods of art-making traditionally used in therapeutic and educational settings for participants to express their emotions, reflect on their experiences, and connect with the world. Unlike studio art courses, Margo Fuchs Knill and Paolo J. Knill explain that Expressive Arts invite low artistic skill as long as participants put in effort and are willing to reflect on their design choices (182); hence, as Carol Shore emphasizes, anyone can create art as long as they engage with the process of composing it (4). My Expressive Arts curriculum intersects with works of Composition scholars such as Jody Shipka, Patricia A. Dunn, and Kristie S. Fleckenstein, who believe art-making creates nonlinear, engaging ways for students to compose in writing courses, as well as Curriculum theorists such as Maxine Greene, John Dewey, and Elliot Eisner, who advocate for arts integration as a tool for students to have meaningful experiences in educational settings.

Before the pandemic, I knew my Expressive Arts curriculum was successful through multiple cycles of practitioner action research. I found that Expressive Arts invited students to express their diverse linguistic pathways (Hash, “Articulating Literacy” 19) and engaged them more than my writing courses did when

they solely emphasized composing alphabetic text (Hash, “Articulation: Engagement in Composition Courses” 102–20); however, the success was all based on in-person interactions between students and myself. During my university’s extended “two-week spring break” due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I received notification that faculty should prepare to move courses to online formats for the rest of the semester. I could not imagine how my courses could maintain Expressive Arts in an online format, but what I did not realize at the time was that, as Scott Warnock explains in *Teaching Writing Online: How & Why*, online teaching can first be about *migration* rather than *transformation*. I needed to consider what I did well (Expressive Arts), then think about how online resources could support my curriculum rather than take away from it (xvii). This chapter addresses not only the ways in which I migrated Expressive Arts writing instruction online to support students during pandemic learning, but also how Expressive Arts transformed my understanding of online learning and what was possible for my curriculum.

## MIGRATING ONLINE

During the two weeks I initially had to adapt my writing courses to an online format, I first considered eliminating the Expressive Arts elements. Although I saw value in them, pandemic pedagogy encouraged instructors to only keep what was essential (Miller). My department chair suggested that we solicit feedback from our students as to what they wanted the class to look like going forward. In an anonymous Google form, I asked students questions about internet access, if they were still living in the same time zone, and whether they would prefer to meet as a class or not. Although I assumed they might prefer asynchronous assignments and less interaction, most of them wrote that they hoped there would still be Expressive Arts in the virtual format (Hash, “Opportunity for Expression” 254). I was not even sure if I could make standard writing instruction happen online effectively, much less Expressive Arts. My students would no longer be physically with me and I could not offer them art supplies the way I did in-person. As I began to revise my curriculum, I considered if it was possible for my course to feel anything like what it had been before COVID-19 forced it into an online format. So, I began with what I hoped Expressive Arts could still bring to my online writing courses: active learning, emotional expression, and community. After an entire year of using Expressive Arts in online writing courses, I am surprised at how much active learning, expression, and community are apparent. To successfully migrate my Expressive Arts curriculum online, I considered the following elements:

## Expression

Expressive Arts in writing courses allow for more inclusive, nonlinear, experimental ways for students to express emotions and experiences than alphabetic methods of communication can provide. Especially during the pandemic, students were influenced by many experiences and emotions that could affect their learning. As Mark Pearson and Helen Wilson note, emotions continuously interact with cognitive processes (129). Although creating space for this type of expression might seem less essential than writing instruction when moving online, students must have opportunities to express their emotions for deep learning to occur. In *Online Teaching at its Best: Merging Instructional Design with Teaching and Learning Research*, Linda B. Nilson and Ludwika A. Goodson also recognize that emotions and connection to personal experiences, in fact, deepen learning in online courses, explaining that “[s]tudents learn new material better and can remember it longer when the material evokes emotional and not just intellectual or physical involvement” because it “mirrors the biological base of learning, which is the close communication between the frontal lobes of the brain and the limbic system” (81). Allowing students to make connections with their personal experiences and express emotions biologically strengthens and forms synapses. Although traditional writing instruction often encourages students to filter out their emotions in writing, Angela Lafflen points out that emotions function rhetorically to express tone and content; therefore, online methods of writing instruction such as discussion forums are a rhetorical tool for students to explore emotions without relying on body language or other physical cues. Instead, students can explore visual and textual markers of emotion in their own and peers’ responses (109).

For synchronous course meetings, I decided to devote the first eight minutes of class to emotional expression so that students could process their feelings and experiences, then focus on the course objectives. This assignment was based on the success I had when I posted a similar assignment asking students how they were feeling when we first moved to online learning during the pandemic (Hash, “Expressive Arts in Virtual Spaces” 8). During synchronous course meetings, I structured art activities that related to students’ feelings about assignments and readings instead of just displaying knowledge. Then, they could share with their peers in breakout rooms. For asynchronous meetings, I also provided opportunities for students to express their emotions and personal connections to course materials on our university’s course page through discussion forums, where their peers could then comment on each other’s posts.

## Workshopping

Especially during the pandemic, video conferencing fatigue is something students may experience daily (McWhirter 41). They are expected to be online to participate in courses, then also to use screens to complete their work. Expressive Arts help combat fatigue by allowing students to compose without using screens. Another result of online assignments and course meetings is passive learning. Students are often asked to sit back and listen, where they may also be distracted by other things in their environments. Expressive Arts require students to create constructed knowledge, which enhances learning. They provide productive challenges for students online as well as in-person. Nilson and Goodson explain that creative learning and thinking surpass technical expertise and involve intersections of “creative thinking skills, motivation, procedural and technical knowledge, metacognitive awareness, and commitment to the creative process” (26). When engaging in creative activities, students learn new material faster and remember it longer than they do with passive learning, and activities that hold their attention and focus the most involve “human faces, color, intensity, extreme contrasts, movement, change, drama, instructor enthusiasm, and personal relevance” (80). Expressive Arts can infuse color, nuance, and excitement into composition processes online.

Although I do accept digital art from students, hardly any students utilized this option in my three semesters of teaching online. For asynchronous work, they created art, then posted it to the discussion forums. For synchronous meetings, I provided art activities that lasted from five to twenty minutes, depending on the complexity of the prompt. Students could turn their cameras off to compose. Once the workshop time finished, I put them in breakout rooms to share their work with their peer groups. Both types of assignments invited students to create on something other than a screen and to explore personal connections and methods of expression, but the sharing to the forum via breakout rooms sparked social interaction and community.

## Community

Peer groups have always been an important part of my writing courses. I have never assigned group projects because they often have negative effects on students, but when my students were in-person, I put them into collaborative groups of 3–5 depending on the course and always gave them individual grades for participation. I randomly assigned the groups and kept them all semester so that students could build rapport and connections with each other. They were each other’s peer workshop groups, but each class also involved making art and sharing with their group members. By the end of the semester, it was not uncommon for



group members who met in my course to become roommates and close friends because of how much Expressive Arts facilitated connection.

When planning my online courses, I knew that fostering community between students would take more effort. Students could turn their cameras off, decide not to participate, etc. In *Online Teaching at its Best: Merging Instructional Design with Teaching and Learning Research*, Nilson and Goodson also explain that in face-to-face classrooms, spontaneous interactions between students are more likely to occur, whereas in online courses, instructors “must design productive interactions in advance” (132). But although facilitating community between students may require more planning from the instructor, peer interactions can be a valuable support system for students. In 2013, the Conference on College Composition and Communication stated that “writing instruction that is conducted online requires online support systems” in “A Position Statement of Principles and Effective Practices in Online Writing Instruction” (CCCC Committee for Effective Practices in Online Writing Instruction 26). Support systems can involve individual support from the instructor or digital supports, but socialization can support students cognitively and emotionally in online courses more than individual factors. In “Measuring the Community in Online Classes,” Beth Rubin and Ronald Fernandes illuminate how “online classes are more successful in supporting deep learning when they are characterized by a community of inquiry” (125). Online courses can also be lonely, as Nilson and Goodson notice, describing how students feel “isolated when they spend hours studying all alone and interacting only with a computer” (121); therefore, one of the most effective supports for students in online courses is peer interaction that encourages them to challenge and express themselves with others. Expressive Arts not only help facilitate communities of inquiry, but they also create opportunities for empathy between students. Jane A. Warren and Ashley Nash define empathy in “Creating Space for Connection: Creativity in the Classroom” as “as having the experience of being in another person’s world while not losing one’s sense of self” (95). Whether in-person or online, Expressive Arts provide windows into people’s experiences that alphabetic text may restrict or limit more, while still maintaining both the artist’s and the viewers’ constructed knowledge.

In their study of online learning communities, Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt note in *The Virtual Student: A Profile and Guide to Working with Online Learners* that online learning communities include people with shared purposes, uses of technology, and engaging in collaborative and reflective learning (3). By including art-making in the writing classroom, students had shared purposes that were not limited to creating alphabetic text, allowing them to explore more commonalities and differences between their methods of expression. My assignments are also predominantly reflective to align with Expressive Arts, which takes the pressure and anxiety of generating a correct answer off students. For synchronous

course meetings, I utilized video conference breakout rooms so each peer group could have privacy. On asynchronous course days, students posted their work to discussion forums on our university's course webpage. Warnock notes that discussion forums are especially effective in writing courses because they involve a "complexity of audience," allowing students to write for each other instead of just themselves and the instructor, enabling them to "practice invention skills, take risks, and develop their own authoritative voices" (70). To make sure students had audience members other than myself, I required them to comment on each group member's forum posts throughout the semester.

## TRANSFORMATION ONLINE

As an entire year of online writing instruction comes to a close, I recognize that my Expressive Arts curriculum did not simply migrate online. Instead, these arts-based curricular methods transformed my online courses into something more for students than writing instruction; Expressive Arts became a space for students to express themselves and support each other, causing them to put more time and effort into what they composed in my course compared to their other courses. Through focal interviews and visual data collected under IRB exemption for educational settings, students told me that they felt more motivated to complete work during my course because the Expressive Arts activities allowed them to complete work without using a screen, alleviating some of their fatigue and making them feel more connected to their learning because they had a choice in what hands-on activity they desired to engage with. When discussing the effect Expressive Arts had on his pandemic learning, Connor, who was a self-described resistant writer and artist at the beginning of the semester, explained that art-making required active learning and being present for my course, whereas other courses did not feel like they were actually "happening" because they did not require him to engage meaningfully with content. He elaborated by stating, "It kept me grounded in the same sense of you are actually in college, like doing college work, and it kept me going. [It] gives a sense of normalcy." Bree typically enjoyed writing and art, also recognized that the Expressive Arts elements helped motivate her. Although she typically did not mind school assignments, online courses made her feel that she continuously had assignments to complete, but the art activities felt like a "fun distraction" from schoolwork even though she was actually being productive. She stated, "It's not like you're not doing anything. You're doing your work, but it's helping you explore your ideas, even if you don't realize you're doing it at the time." Figure 8.1 includes Bree's mood board assignment that she created and posted to the course's discussion forum. The assignment required students to create a mood board based on their ideas for their first paper assignment, allowing

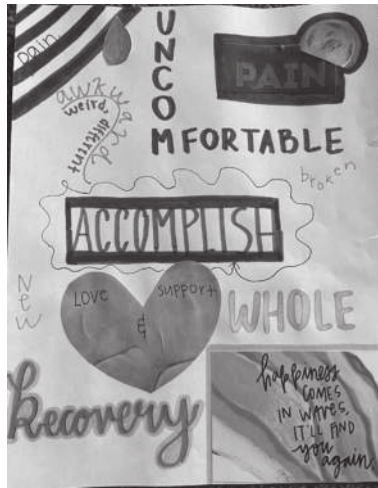


Figure 8.1: Bree's Mood Board

Source: Bree Eldridge

them to brainstorm and begin composing ideas, while also getting feedback from their peers and myself.

I was also surprised by how much students were willing to express in an online environment when provided with the opportunity. Although students began the semester sharing more surface-level or censored aspects of their lives, as the semester progressed, I noticed an increase of depth and vulnerability in their writing and art. When reflecting on the expressive elements of my course versus his other online courses, Evan, one of my second-year writing students, shared with me, “A lot of people aren’t used to be expressing themselves in any sort of way, so encouraging people to express themselves in that way, it’s very beneficial for a lot of people to kind of get some anger some stress out.” He saw the Expressive Arts assignments as an opportunity to release some of the emotions that had been building within him. Another one of my second-year students, Bethany, recognized that making the art helped her process and reflect on emotions she was less aware of until the assignments required her to do so: “I thought I was normal, but until I started doing the assignment, it made me realize that I felt these different things.” Figures 8.2, 8.3, and 8.4 showcase Bethany’s as well as two other students’ art and written reflections to the check-in prompt I use both synchronously and asynchronously that asks students how they are feeling/what they are experiencing (Hash, “Expressive Arts in Virtual Spaces” 8). It is clear from their forum posts that they spent a great deal of time and effort both in composing their artwork as well as expressing themselves.



“As I sit down to write this reflection, I am feeling many different emotions. Gloom, gratitude, and nostalgia are a few that come to mind. My kitchen table is the place I have done school work all throughout high school, so this is a very nostalgic feeling. I’ve moved fourteen times throughout my childhood and early teenage years, and I was homeschooled until the fifth grade. Having self-discipline and finding motivation within yourself is familiar for me, but not always enjoyable. It is also a very nostalgic feeling to have my mom in the next room over checking in on me every so often to make sure I’m staying ‘on task’ despite being almost twenty-years old. This entire situation proves that some things never change. As for the gloom I’m experiencing, it is currently raining and everything appears dull. I’ve taken up running in my neighborhood as a hobby and way to get out of the house these past few weeks. The rain lets me know that I may have to stay inside all day today. While writing this, I realize how small my problems are in comparison to others. I am so grateful I have a place to live and a family during this time of uncertainty.”

Figure 8.2: Bethany’s Mood Board

Source: Bethany Memola

Although my students’ peer groups have always had a level of closeness, I also noticed an increase in peer group support and connection in my online courses. While many of my students noted that they barely knew their peers’ names in their other online courses, they stated that the Expressive Arts activities fostered strong connections within their peer groups. Students became vulnerable in their artistic expressions, which facilitated empathy and community. Brad, who I taught during the semester the pandemic began, noted his surprise at how willing his peers were to put some of their experiences out there for others, telling me, “Judging by some of the explanations and descriptions people gave, I was kind of surprised how thorough a lot of them were and how much people are willing to say about it.” He explained that the art became an outlet for people to “recognize how they really feel about something and to show it to other people.” Many students recognized that seeing their peers’ artistic expressions helped encourage expression within themselves. Jordan, a student in one of my Honors writing courses, shared with me that “At first, I was kind of like, ‘I don’t know



Figure 8.3: Paola's Mood Board

Source: Paola Rivero

"This semester has been very odd yet transformative for me. This is my second semester of college and it is unlike I could have ever imagined it would be. When I think back to the person I was year ago, it is clear to me that the pandemic has led to some growth and changes. That being said, I am still struggling with adjusting to online classes and a lack of social interaction, compared to what I was expecting before the pandemic. It has been really tough to navigate to the confusing world of online learning as well as the boredom that comes with being safe and following restrictions. I tried to encompass this in my painting by mixing all of the colors I had in the background, and including words or symbols that relate to my experiences this semester."



Figure 8.4: Mikayla's Mood Board

Source: Mikayla Stahlbusch

"Lately, I have felt like I am always under or overreacting, without an in-between. I am trying to find a feeling of normalcy by keeping a routine of other hobbies and schoolwork, but I can't get rid of the hanging-cloud of worry. Part of my concern and worry comes from the fact that someone in my family works at a biomedical company, so the current situation is just \*always\* being talked about. Also, I came to [Appalachian State] as an out-of-state student, so being back home without the community I built there feels really isolating. I keep trying to "deal with the cloud" by taking everything day by day and trying not to think too far into the future, which helps break up the worry sometimes too. I think as classes continue some of my interests [ . . . ] will start to help alleviate some anxiety by giving me other things to mentally focus on, and help the cloud feel lighter."

what I'm gonna do.' ... But then I started reading other people's responses and it was, it was really cool. I got ideas and got excited to share." As the semester progressed, students began to look forward to interacting with each other virtually so they could be supported and support one another. Alannah, a student who missed the opportunity to interact with her peers in other courses when online, expressed the impact that her peer group had on her overall mood: "I don't have any online classes where everyone communicates and collaborates the way that they do in this class. And so it was a really good feeling when I posted my art, and then commented on it and said things like, 'This is so cool, like I hope you're staying healthy, do you need anything?' So, it was just, I don't know; it brought some positivity to my day." Bethany saw the group interactions as an escape from their individual worlds, telling me, "It was nice to share [my art] with somebody, because everyone's in the same boat. But I feel like people don't really talk about it that much like that. So that was a nice kind of escape." The interactions with peers enabled students to feel connected with each other and less affected by their personal struggles and experiences for a while. When reflecting on her experiences within her peer group, Alannah saw the Expressive Arts prompts as a unifying entry point where everyone could find commonality in their experiences, allowing them to build community: "It's kind of really interesting to see people like coming together. We're all in completely different locations and all in extremely different situations, but there's that like one big piece. It's like to be able to kind of track that through a bunch of people and see—it's literally like a check-in, like, you're seeing how everybody else is doing. And like you can sit down and relate to them." Overall, even in an online format students expressed that the group interactions were one of the most enjoyable and helpful experiences within my writing course to facilitate their learning and success.

## THE FUTURE OF EXPRESSIVE ARTS IN ONLINE WRITING COURSES

Ultimately, moving into a digital space made community still possible in pandemic learning. Community is still possible if the curriculum allows for it. Although I began online instruction skeptical of how my curriculum would migrate to a virtual format, I found that Expressive Arts can still offer transformative experiences for students, especially for supporting them during the pandemic. I thought that an online format would destroy the community students felt in the class, close students off from being vulnerable, and limit their ability to express themselves as well as communicate with each other. But what I found is that online formats actually provided more opportunities for students to express than face-to-face

instruction did alone. Through my data collection and analysis, I saw that online learning with Expressive Arts:

- *Enabled students to complete assignments at their own pace when they felt ready to do them.* Some students jumped into the assignment and posted quickly to forums, while others preferred time to contemplate the prompt.
- *Invited students to communicate in dialogue with their instructor and each other.* I commented on every discussion post and noticed that students wrote lengthy messages to their peer group members as the semester progressed. Additionally, as students felt more comfortable with each other, I saw many peer groups write back-and-forth conversations with each other.
- *Allowed for a community of support during a stressful time.* Regardless of students' individual situations, all of their environments changed during the pandemic on some level. Students were asked to express their emotions on the situation, but also to respond to each other. Seeing their classmates' posts and the responses students got from their peers were some of the greatest benefits students received in my online courses.

It is important to note that without the digital affordances of a secure place for students to share their work for only their classmates and instructor to view, students may not have been as expressive. If students had been asked to post on a personal social media platform or other public site, they may have been concerned about a larger audience's reactions. Using the university's online system contributed to that safe space, but it also made that private space possible. As an instructor who had never taught online, learning a completely new platform would have taken away from the time I had to modify my Expressive Arts curriculum to online learning. The university's platform was already familiar to use as well as secure.

After seeing what digital platforms can make possible for entire courses, I have to say that I am re-thinking my hesitation to teach online in future semesters. Although I do miss being face-to-face with my students, there are still aspects of online teaching that I will seek to maintain. Forum posts create more community for peer groups than students turning in their homework to me. Breakout rooms can create more intimate spaces for expression than twenty or more people in the same room. I now know that Expressive Arts cannot only function in a digital space, but also significantly benefit students in writing courses.

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# Red Pen or Cursor? Assimilation and Resistance in a Digital Writing Workshop

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## THE PARADIGM THAT DIDN'T REALLY SHIFT

In her 1982 speech to writing teachers, rhetorician Maxine Hairston offered a meticulous historical look at what was then new research, but recognized that most writing teachers were still teaching in the ways they'd been taught. Hairston invoked physicist/philosopher Thomas Kuhn, declaring that composition was shifting its paradigm from an emphasis on product to process: "... the writing teachers' frustration and disenchantment may be less important than the fact that if they teach from the traditional paradigm, they are frequently emphasizing techniques that the research has largely dis-credited" (78). Why are so many writing teachers teaching the same way they were taught? It's forty years later. And now, in 2021, in an educational culture that demands quantification and replication, product is even more valued than when Hairston spoke of a paradigm shift. Not much has changed or shifted, and we are in the midst of a new paradigm—the increasingly digital educational space.

Hairston spoke and wrote those words two years after the introduction of the Apple II, well before personal computers appeared in writing classes. Our discs were floppy, connections unreliable, and printer paper had little holes that tore. There were a few writing instructors experimenting with long-distance phone lines, lurking at midnight with clunky software. There was no Internet, no Wikipedia. Those of us who had been teaching writing were awed by the power of

the cursor and the delete key. But alas, although our computer life has grown and developed, and shifted our technological writing paradigm, not much has changed in the way we teach writing, revision, and response. Kuhn and Hairston reminded us that we work within a paradigm until something changes. Ways of teaching writing are based on traditions borne well before 1982 and well before the computing era.

In a sociological/anthropological sphere, we've come to label responding as "performance" (Turner) and "presentation of self" (Cantwell; Goffman; Newkirk). The Library of Congress's *Ethnographic Thesaurus* threads 21 very general categories for it; a quick glance shows "performance" is nuanced differently in various academic fields. Anthropologists know that a culture re-presents itself to itself when it performs in a public space (Cantwell; Handelman). And we consider writing a public space performance: a writer, a reader, and a crafted message.

In this chapter, we recount three examples of college students re-imagining how they respond to writing mediated by digital tools. In a course called "Approaches to Teaching Writing" (ATW), we worked with students who are all heading toward a career connected to writing. They seek teaching licensure and a bachelor's or masters, they work towards an MFA in writing, or are PhD students preparing themselves to teach composition. During the one semester's course we team-taught, we asked students to respond to example texts in two different forms: as teacher and as peer, using a collaborative online word processor. This course took place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and was therefore fully in-person. During that semester, we recorded reflective conversations and took notes on how students interacted inside their assigned writing groups and within the texts. All the students enrolled in the class participated, and we assigned a pseudonym to each to protect their privacy. We categorized their responses, as well as our combined notes and observations using Saldaña's in vivo coding. Our interpretive approach sought to understand emerging topics that we turned into the categories we use later in this chapter. Then, in two additional semesters, Michael taught the same course solo. He asked students to deposit several versions of one major paper over the course of those semesters, and gave explicit instructions to writing groups about how they should respond. Students used the same collaborative online word processor as the previous semester. Spring 2020 began in-person, but transitioned online as the country shut down. Fall 2020 was entirely online. Students' reflections after the final deposit served to support the conclusions from our team-taught semester's data.

## DIGITAL WRITING SPACE AS A NEW PARADIGM

The introduction of home computing began to reshape how we think, learn, connect and compose. Our old mindset was linear, individual, and product-driven. Learning spaces reflected this mindset: top-down, with knowledge located in individuals and institutions. Our “new” mindset is a different way of thinking entirely, one that values collaboration, decentering knowledge and power (Cope and Kalantzis 5; Knobel and Lankshear 81). We say “new” only to contrast with the former mindset, as it has been a focus since before Hairston identified it so clearly in her 1982 speech. Digital spaces, reflective of this “new” mindset, are flexible, interactive, and multimodal spaces (Beach and Doerr-Stevens; Collins and Halverson) where “technical skills, media literacy, and even basic English literacy” (boyd 25) shape individual experiences. Contexts, audiences, and identities are so intertwined, it takes some expertise to navigate ever-shifting digital spaces (boyd).

While students are more accustomed to interacting with and through digital tools in their social sphere, employing those tools in academic tasks takes direct instruction (Graham and Perin; MacArthur). The paradigm shift Hairston described recognized this new mindset as best practice for teaching writing. The new shift is describing an increasingly essential set of skills for engaging in the global economy (Cope and Kalantzis). Navigating, communicating, and composing in digital spaces are skills our ATW students needed to learn as preservice teachers, and skills their future students will need to learn.

The power of a digital space as a learning space is in its connectedness. Ito et al. define three spheres of connected learning: peer supported, interest powered, and academically oriented. Connected learning “seeks to build communities and collective capacities for learning and opportunity” (8). A connected learning space is learner-driven, collaborative, interest-based, and equitable. It is a space that can decenter dominant language and ideology (Lee and Handsfield; Price-Dennis, “Developing”), reposition students as more agentive in their own writing processes (Lee et al.; Magnifico et al.), and put students more in control of their own learning (Beach and Doerr-Stevens; Collins and Halverson). It can be a tool for equity in the classroom (Collins and Halverson; Lee and Handsfield; Price-Dennis; Price-Dennis et al.). It is a digital affinity space, a way to situate learning in an academic sphere but outside the rigid confines of a traditional classroom, and a place to privilege student voices, passions, and thoughts. We’d hoped to provide such spaces in our exercises, allowing our students time to try out their own literacies and reposition themselves as both teachers and learners.

A digital space, we reasoned, affords the writing process three necessary elements: collaboration, recursion, and flexibility, with echoes of our writing scholarship’s history: Hairston identifies these three elements as essential to her new

paradigm. Writing is a collaborative act between novice and expert as well as between novice and peer (Bridwell; Sommers; Witte). We think digital spaces provide a venue for all to interact. In a collaborative space, novices have the opportunity to try on the identities of writer, reader/audience, editor, critic, and expert (Daiute; Lee et al.; Pritchard and Morrow). They shift between each as the situation demands, just as they identify and manipulate the contexts, audiences, and identities of the complicated digital world (boyd; Pritchard and Morrow).

Because of these roles, as well as the asynchronous nature of digital collaborative spaces, the writing process becomes incredibly recursive. We've known that good writing is recursive and repetitive, requiring multiple passes with varied purposes (Elbow; Gallagher). It is the very paradigm that Hairston mentioned 40 years ago. The collaborative and flexible nature of digital spaces (boyd; Ito et al.; Lammers et al.) makes room for readers and writers to work together, take up varied identities, and take the time to revisit and revise.

## RESEARCH IN ONE DIGITAL AND NON-DIGITAL SITE

“Approaches to Teaching Writing” allows preservice English teachers to explore writing practices and instruction through praxis. As Bonnie, Michael and Claudia planned our co-teaching, we wondered if we could attempt to reinterpret the writing conferences we had our students participate in during class time and reposition them in an online environment. We designed the class to push these preservice teachers in their ways of thinking about teaching writing and challenge their notions of “the way things are done.” We asked our students to experience the writing process as a writer, reflect as a teacher, and think critically about where the process does and does not work for them. Using an online word-processing tool, we asked our students to *re-present* (Cantwell) writing conferences in two forms, two classroom scenarios we believe are realistic today: “flipped” classrooms, and hybrid learning environments. How might this new digital space influence the ways our preservice teacher/students talk about the texts in both forms: working simultaneously (*synchronous*), and working on their own time (*asynchronous*)? With the digital space mediating their conversations, how would they interact as readers/writers/teachers? Would they feel different about the process when online than when in person?

For both versions of the exercise, we used Office365 which offers shared online document editing. We managed the groups through the university's learning management system (LMS), so only our assigned group members had access to the document. For Exercise One, done asynchronously, we gave each group a writing sample from an anonymous 8th grade student who had been in a past class of a colleague in a suburban middle school. We provided basic student

information, and asked students to interact with the text as if they were the teacher in a writing conference. We gave them the week between class meetings to read and respond to the sample text, and also respond to their classmates' responses. What resulted were robust dialogues with the text and with one another without sharing the same space. The readers were physically disembodied, but their voices were actively engaged within the text. The asynchronous model lent focus to the utterances, with each word directed at the text, sometimes mediated by another comment.

Exercise Two, using the same groups as the first, used a personal essay by an anonymous high school student, submitted to a national writing contest. We asked the groups to comment about and annotate the essay in real-time during a class session. We wanted them to have a digital conversation about the text, to replace the verbal dialogue of a traditional revision group (some would call a workshop) with a dialogue in another shared document, not to have several disparate paragraphs from each participant. We wondered if the electronic (and "distant") features would encourage or discourage different kinds of responses. We simply wanted to see whether it was an efficient or effective kind of response.

Our students responded to this piece online in the same way they might respond on paper. They gave constructive criticism, highlighted areas of strength and ways to improve the essay. Students like Anna and Elise (all names are pseudonyms) imagined themselves as teachers speaking with the student, offering an in-person writing conference to continue the revision process. In Landon's response, the student writer remains imaginary. He talks about what he might say to the student rather than address the student directly, as Anna and Elise did. His comment begins with compliments, and the comment continues into areas of improvement, which he sees as a very teacherly response. Anna points directly to textual elements to start her response. All four examples indicate that the substance of the responses is not largely different from how these students might respond on paper:

Anna: "Notice in this paragraph that you started every sentence with 'Video games ...' Try to work on sentence variation and start your other sentences with something else. If you meet with me I can help you come up with some other alternatives!"

Monica: "It would make your argument even stronger if you also presented evidence for the other side of the argument."

Elise: "Hmm, I'm not sure what this means. Let's talk about this idea and how it fits with your argument when we meet."

Landon: "First off, I would congratulate the student on being so knowledgeable about video games and how they can be incorporated into a student's learning. The student has a strong argument about why video games can help learning."

In Exercise Two we simulated an oral “workshop,” wondering if the electronic (and “distant”) features would encourage or discourage different kinds of responses. We simply wanted to see whether it was an efficient or effective kind of response:

Lisa: “The first sentence of the last paragraph begins in a very complex and vivid way. However, as the sentence continues you begin to add too much into one sentence which obscures the initial image you’ve created for us. Try reading this sentence out loud?”

Monica: “[to the author] I think clarifying the relationship with the father before jumping into the scene would be beneficial.”

Anna: “[W]ow I really thought this was a sweet piece at first and you made it turn so dark.”

Mia: “Anna, would you be saying that in a workshop? Rude!”

Sofia: “I also had to reread certain sections multiple times because the point was somewhat lost in the descriptive language. I would also like to know why you chose driving. Was it the rite of passage to growing up? Or did you really feel that this moment was a time where you and your father could come back together?”

As in Exercise One, we see our students’ conversation about the text with the author and with each other. The brief exchange between Anna and Mia shows their awareness of a new space, wondering if Anna’s comment about the dark feeling she gets would have been made during an in-person workshop. Sofia, Monica, and Lisa all direct their comments toward the author. Monica adds the tag “to the author” to clarify this utterance from others directed at her classmates, a tag that would be unnecessary in person but does help clarify her intended audience in the digital space.

Exercise One asked our students to take on the role of teacher, responding to a completed and submitted piece of writing with the writer absent. Exercise Two asked the students to respond more like peers, in a workshop environment in which the assumption is that the writer has a chance to revise after the conversation. In both roles, we wondered how they’d mediate “response” through the digital tools. We were surprised that the substance of their comments aligned with what we would expect from a traditional workshop. The digital space did not seem to alter what our students said in response to the examples. However, we found a huge difference in the student attitudes towards the digital tools, their perceptions of themselves as teachers, and their willingness to adapt their practices varied greatly.



## PRESERVICE TEACHERS CONFRONT A DIGITAL WRITING ENVIRONMENT

Recreating writing conferences in an online environment taught us a lot about college students, future English Language Arts teachers, and writing teachers, about their responses and reactions to including digital resources in the classroom. First, we were able to find the usual moments of struggle as our students shifted their identities from students to teachers. Second, we were able to witness students trying to adapt traditional paper-based processes to the new digital paradigm. Finally, we identified two groups: those who behaved more like assimilators, and those who were resistant to change. These binaries are not either/or, but areas of bend and shift. We construct them as such for the sake of discussion, comparison, and conversation.

Some of our students adapted more easily to the environment in which the interactions occurred. Others showed more resistance to a practice they themselves did not experience in school or that they found unnecessary. Upon discussion, the group was able to find pros and cons of both experiences, with students' preferences swinging back and forth like a pendulum on which one they preferred. There was one consensus: if you give a student a computer, assign a research task, and forget detailed instructions, you won't have a completed research task. Having future English teachers who grew up with technology—chatting with friends after school, as opposed to hanging out with them, having their own websites (blogs, social media profiles, school sites)—does not guarantee they will know what to do when given any task that involves a computer.

Teacher vs. Student Positionality: "What I Did is What I Would Have Liked as a Student"

In the process of constructing their responses, our students first had to identify their positionality. Were they students or teachers? In our view, they operated as both. Their discussions following the exercises revealed that what they liked and disliked as students receiving feedback strongly influenced their positionality as teachers. What they do, how, and why, as well as the way they assessed and responded to the assignment reflected their own preferences as student writers receiving feedback. Elise explained: "For me as a student, it is intimidating to see a lot of comments without a cohesive statement. So, trying to give cohesive feedback is something I try to do when giving online feedback." Elise often situated herself as a professional, having worked as a tutor at the University's Writing Center. Here, she leads with the student experience and uses it to frame response

practices. Elise feels intimidated by a volume of comments, so prefers to give fewer but more substantial ones on papers.

Monica's remark on this topic was straightforward: "What I did is what I would have liked as a student, so at least I commented with positive things. It's [getting positive comments] been one of the most beneficial experiences I've ever had, I'm actually doing it in my classroom...." Like Elise, Monica uses her student experience as foundation for her instructional practices, and is aware of that connection. Monica feels that getting positive feedback is most beneficial, and so her responses in both exercises identified instances where the writer does something well, and where Monica as reader and respondent makes connections with the writer.

Both Elise and Monica avoided giving direct criticism in the exercises, demonstrating heavy influence from their student experience; they find themselves collapsing their student and teacher identities, and so do we. Though Elise is experienced as a tutor, her remarks during the exercise and in discussion show that she still holds a strong student position. Similarly, Monica bases praxis on her previous experience as a student. Exercises like ours challenge preservice teachers to consider "praxis," recognizing the links between old "analogue" habits and experimenting with new "digital" ones.

### Paper vs Screen: "I'd Write a Lot Less on Paper. You Have More Freedom on the Screen"

Some students preferred face-to-face and paper responses over digital interactions, even if they acknowledged both have their pros and cons. Those that are "Pro Paper" and handwritten comments emphasize how comfortable they feel with tradition and don't see the need to change what has worked for decades. Below, two of our students make direct comparisons between analogue and digital practices, indicating what they prefer about handwriting comments:

Lisa: "[I]n the digital version it's hard to show or highlight or circle, so I wrote a bit less but if I had an actual paper, I'd circle, and mark, and write, it'd be easier to have it in front of me."

Julia: "[On screen writing] it felt a little more I don't know ... aggressive. It feels like once something it's typed out and ... in there ... written feels more informal, more personal. I have [online] papers. I have not read comments because they freak me out so much: I'm terrified to check those. I don't know why that is ... I get really excited when I get handed a manuscript on paper and I see the comments written in and where they are. The computer is so much more intimidating for me."

Both students discuss barriers they faced in the exercises. Lisa found the digital tool cumbersome and difficult to use, which led to a less robust interaction

with the text. Julia, on the other hand, seemed to find no issue in using the tool. However, she had a strong and unexpected emotional reaction. The screen felt “aggressive” and more formal, more imposing to interact with as a student. As she is thinking of herself as a teacher, Julia still has that same emotional response. Her fear of the digital responses seems to hold her back from using the digital tools in our exercises.

While many of our students expressed a more Pro Paper perspective, several were “Pro Screen.” These students jumped at the opportunity to try a different approach to providing a response in a different space:

Mia: “I’d write a lot less [on paper]. You have more freedom [on the screen].”

Anna: “In my class for my practicum, they would put all the assignments in the classroom in a like Google doc and they were able to watch through the documents really fast and if the students were stuck they [the instructors] could like offer support really quickly and easily so I actually felt like it was easier to communicate.”

Where Lisa experienced restriction, Anna felt ease and practicality. Where Julia felt fear and apprehension, Mia felt freedom. Anna also speaks to the trajectory of modern classrooms, moving towards fully digital learning environments. Anna sees digital literacy as a strength, or even a potential necessity, in a future classroom, and Mia indicates a preference for the openness of a digital space, one that promises flexibility. Anna and Mia’s contrasting experiences highlight this binary, but there were participants who emphasized the importance of combining both methods for the benefit of the students. They claim respecting traditions while adapting new, and not so new, technologies is possible:

Julia: “I really like workshopping, I like when there’s several students on another one’s student paper and having conversations, I like those conversations; but one proof this is that we can have those conversations without the student feeling nervous, because some students may not feel like talking face to face with this other student, or feel like they might be judged, this gives that kind of anonymity where you can type with the screen barrier.”

Landon: “I also, personally, with online feedback like this, I think it is more beneficial later on in the process. Because the problem with this feedback is that it is not a conversation with the writer.”

Even after expressing apprehension and fear related to receiving feedback on screen, Julia recognizes the potential benefit for other students. Though not a part of her praxis yet, Julia seems to identify a way to incorporate digital tools. Landon already sees a way to blend analogue and digital spaces across time. Conceding that the digital feedback is not a conversation with the student, Landon

advocates for a face-to-face discussion early, with a digital space taking over later in the revision process. Many of our students believe that digital platforms can be incorporated as part of the writing and revision processes, but they don't want to abandon their analogue practices.

Assimilation vs Resistance: "I Think a Lot of English People Are ... Averse a Little Bit to Technology, and That's Scary to Me ... "

For our students, accessing the document was not hard. But having not received detailed instructions, many of them resisted the work, not knowing "exactly" what to do. And there lies the dichotomy: our students own the schemata and problem-solving skills to know how to work the computers and digital platforms without any inconvenience, but we could see that they had not developed enough critical thinking skills to break free from traditional ways of knowing and doing. They were still working through the same paradigm shift Hairston identified in 1982. Those students who resisted the new method of revision found three barriers: lack of (perceived) instruction, confusion with the tool, and clashing epistemology. While the first two barriers may be overcome with experience and time, the third poses a pedagogical conundrum: how do we push preservice teachers to critically analyze what "worked" for them as students and adapt it to a quickly changing classroom environment?

Lisa: "I wanted more of a directive on how you wanted us to comment or what specifically you wanted us to comment on." Lisa exemplifies the first barrier, where our students felt a lack of guidance. We were surprised by this response. The experiments both asked students to respond to writing, a task they had all done before as high school and college students. Was this confusion a result of the perception of this task as an assignment and the desire to do the assignment "right"? The student positionality is very present in the construction of the barrier, the desire to do the work the correct way. For our preservice teachers who are still working on identifying themselves as teachers, this barrier will likely be diminished in time as that identity becomes more concrete:

Carl: "Can I just say that I did that [write longer comments at the end of the document] because I don't know how to use comments on OneDrive?"

Julia: "I couldn't figure out how to do comments ... so it was nice for me just to read through it and be like, generally overall, this is what I liked, this is what I didn't like..."

Carl and Julia, like many of their classmates, expressed frustration with using the tool. Though we gave a tutorial in class about how to add comments and other ways of responding to the given text, our instructions were evidently insufficient

for many students. This is a valuable moment, however, in identifying the drawbacks of the assumption of digital nativity. Now in their early 20s, they grew up in a technology-saturated space. These students would fall into the commonly accepted definition of “digital natives,” yet they are unable to use their nativity to figure out a relatively simple online tool. Assuming that any student can operate a tool without instruction risks making the tool a barrier. When the tool is a barrier, the entire process is disrupted. Along with these correctable barriers, there were instances of complete resistance to technology, of epistemological differences that may preclude the inclusion of technology in future classrooms for these teachers:

Monica: “If everything else is digital, why not have an organic class: no computers, no phones, ‘let’s talk...’ I don’t know ... I’m also more non-tech, like I understand technology, but I prefer not to use it...”

Mara: “I absolutely agree, I think the writing, or the English classroom could be a breather from all the tech in the classroom. Nothing is better than actually speaking to each other, especially when it comes to writing.”

Both Monica and Mara describe a belief that technology tools like those used in our experiments are hindrances in the classroom, that analogue ways of doing these tasks are and always will be “superior.” Monica contends that any inclusion of digital tools or spaces is inorganic. Mara extends that thinking, arguing for a “breather” from technology. Both presume that in-person and analogue is organic and, therefore, superior.

Not everyone accepted this organic classroom idea. Kate claimed: “I think a lot of English majors are ... averse a little bit to technology, and that’s scary to me ... but we live in a time where technology is everywhere, but like, we do have a responsibility, as technology continues to grow to teach our children to be digitally literate, we have to ... we have to be able to use this ....” Many of our students claimed we “owe it to the children” to help them become digitally literate. Some saw it as a “there’s no going back” approach: Kate, for example, declared: “I also want to say that while it feels weird to me, I also grew up with pen and paper response exclusively, and I think for a student it’s not as weird to see feedback digitally like that ... maybe it’s more what they expect ... I mean from a student perspective ....” Perspectives such as Monica’s and Mara’s limit the potential of teaching praxis by limiting the pool of resources. The work of teaching and learning writing has been stagnant since Maxine Hairston identified a tidal shift, but the praxis has yet to catch up. In the face of yet another shift, teacher educators and their students must use digital tools toward their potential.

## ANOTHER SHIFTING PARADIGM

As all English educators know, the transition from being a student to being a teacher is hard. The difference, as one of us tells advisees, “is a lot of kids.” Our students learn to be in charge, and “in front of” as opposed to “among” a class. The performance of pedagogy is expanding to include a digital stage, a new venue and a new set of practices. Responding to student writing is a rhetoric of performance itself. New writing teachers need practice, theory, and partners in order to do it with confidence. Our efforts under the pressure of completion sometimes silence such spaces in our pedagogies. Our exercises opened a door into such spaces, allowing students an opportunity to explore digital pedagogy. We believed that students who are in college right now are “digital natives,” but our preservice teachers indicated otherwise. Comments and actions in the exercises demonstrated that we are still negotiating our own paradigm shifts: from students to teachers, from paper to screen, from resistance to assimilation. We have learned that preservice teachers:

1. Still need directives and instruction when it comes to digital platforms,
2. prefer “old fashioned” pen and paper and face to face responses for writing instruction, both as students and teachers,
3. are willing to adapt technology in the classroom for the sake of innovation and the students’ benefit.

These three lessons come together in one statement from Julia: “I am a bit of a techno-phobe, and the first thing I thought about when schools went 1:1 with Chromebooks: ‘Does this mean I’ll grade papers online?’ I prefer to read on paper, respond and give feedback on paper. This is something we all must contend with in the digital age. It felt permanent and nerve-wracking.” While she is exercising her teacher positionality, she also struggles with taking paper practices onto the screen. In most of her statements, Julia showed a strong preference for traditional practices. Her preference is less resistance and more hesitance and fear, as Julia indicates she knows the necessity of making the transition, but it feels so “permanent and nerve-wracking” that pushing through the barriers is difficult. We believe that preservice teachers are willing and able to assimilate into the new digital culture. To do so, they require instruction and support. Our students may be “digital natives,” but they aren’t digital experts. They may be familiar with the tools, but they (and we) still need guidance to make the most out of those tools and to assimilate them into traditional practice. Those who have had success in the old paradigm are forced to deal with new colonizers, the digital spaces and tools that are invading, taking over, forcing us to choose between resisting, assimilating, or both. The key is that we have, in fact, had success in the old paradigm.

We have chosen to be English teachers, so it's not surprising to see confusion in the face of the shifting paradigm. It's difficult to make the choice to leave a position of success. It is incumbent upon teacher educators to adapt our practices in order to give room for preservice teachers to expand themselves.

The paradigm is still shifting; it has been since 1982. And so our toolkit for response to writing continues to shift as our teaching writing paradigm shifts—and we need, perhaps, to consider it as we work with new students and new practices in our post-pandemic world.

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# Practical and Transferable: The Quest to Design Online Writing Instruction for Mentoring Professional Doctoral Students

NICHOLAS R. WERSE

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## INTRODUCTION

I have read with interest over the last decade about the trends in graduate-level writing instruction (e.g. Brooks-Gillies et al.; Simpson et al.). Academic writing becomes increasingly disciplinary at the graduate level, as students are mentored into technical modes of academic discourse and knowledge production (Becher and Trowler; Russell). However, those of us who mentor graduate-level writers often strive for a balance between guiding them into these disciplinary conventions and encouraging the development of their unique authorial voices as writers (Micciche). Thus graduate-level writing courses often become highly contextual, depending on the discipline, department, observable student writing needs, and student vocational aspirations.

When the Baylor University EdD in Learning and Organizational Change (EdD-LOC) program leadership asked me to design an online, supplemental writing course, I found myself increasingly examining not simply disciplinary conventions, but more importantly, the relationship between the students' writing needs and the broader goals of the program. Unlike the PhD students I worked with when serving in a Graduate Writing Center, these EdD students pursued their terminal degree in preparation for careers as industry leaders, not professional

academics. This researcher positionality echoed throughout all aspects of their research and writing (Smith et al.). While they aspired to write for academic publishing, many wanted to share their research through practitioner-oriented venues. This process required helping them find their unique authorial voices and guiding them to adjust their writing techniques depending on their intended audience (Hulst).

Furthermore, over the first several terms of providing writing development support to these students, several writing consultants noted a difference between students' self-proclaimed needs and the writing consultants' assessments. Anecdotally, writing consultants noted that students often came assuming they needed help only with APA citations and other stylistic technicalities. Yet, the writing consultants often saw the macrostructural organization as a more pressing concern in the documents they reviewed. Considering this complex convergence of writing needs and expectations, I began a process of assessing the data on the students' writing needs in light of the broader education frameworks employed within the EdD-LOC program. Although I began this process before the COVID-19 pandemic, it started me on a journey of exploring effective online instructional pedagogies that proved both timely and valuable when the pandemic suddenly moved so much of writing development instruction online. I thus reflect on this process post-pandemic to identify some insights that will prove valuable for the future construction of online writing courses.

The following chapter, therefore, unfolds in four steps. First, I describe the program context and the unique student needs that prompted the creation of an online writing course before the onset of the pandemic. Second, I describe the process I used to identify the measurable writing needs of these students, which allowed me to focus the writing course on specific topics. Third, I discuss how I drew upon the program's core educational frameworks to construct this writing course. This chapter concludes by exploring the lessons learned through this process that proved valuable during the age of pandemic instruction.

## **THE NEED FOR A UNIQUE APPROACH TO WRITING INSTRUCTION**

In 2018, the Baylor Department of Curriculum and Instruction launched the EdD-LOC program. Built according to the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate framework or CPED (Hoffman and Perry; Perry; Perry and Imig), the program aimed to prepare scholarly practitioners to serve as transformational leaders in their respective organizations by equipping them to plan, execute, and

evaluate data-informed change. The program quickly exceeded all enrollment projections, resulting in the need to redevelop student support systems.

Among these student support systems, faculty noted the need to provide additional writing support. Students were occasionally years removed from their master's degree and felt "out of practice" with academic writing (Werse et al.). To fill this need, I joined the team as the Graduate Writing Coordinator, just as the first cohort began writing the inaugural chapters of their Problem of Practice dissertations (on this manifestation of the Dissertation in Practice, see Belzer et al.; Belzer and Ryan; Buss and Zambo; Ma et al.). I designed and launched an online writing center exclusively for this program's distance education adult learners. The program's goals and students' vocational aspirations differed from those found in traditional PhD programs (see discussion in Council of Graduate Schools; Neumann). Unlike many PhD students, few of the EdD students had aspirations to become "academic writers." Rather they saw their vocational future in industry practice (Nobles). However, they still had to produce a terminal degree thesis at a research institution.

I designed an online writing center system in which students could sign up for a writing consultation, then send their document along with specific questions or concerns to a writing consultant. This process allowed the writing consultant time to review students' writing and identify key writing practices to workshop together during a meeting. As much as possible, I framed the writing center's services as focused on "writing development" rather than "proofreading." Writing consultants provided "illustrative" rather than "exhaustive" feedback to equip students to apply the feedback throughout their documents. In addition to helping the students grow as writers, this writing center also fulfilled the practical task of guiding students through the style guide conventions needed to submit a thesis to Baylor University. This writing center, therefore, became a source of guidance on APA conventions and the university thesis formatting requirements.

This writing center quickly became popular among the students, as I built a team of two full-time and four part-time staff. Once the program reaches full capacity (540 students), this writing center will offer nearly 2,900 hours of direct student services (writing consultations, document reviews, writing workshops, and more) each 14-week trimester. With so many students, however, writing consultants soon made two observations about trends in their writing consultations.

First, they reported that they spent significant time repeating the same basic things to students that could be easily solved by video tutorials. Some students required "refresher" explanations of grammar and syntax rules, citation conventions, and even how to use MS Word features. The writing consultants noted that it might be helpful to have video tutorials to share with students before the meeting so that the students could review the material and then discuss any questions and workshop specific writing practices with the writing consultant.

Second, the writing consultants noted the frequency with which the students' self-assessments of their writing needs differed from the writing consultants' assessments. Students often came to the writing center with questions about technicalities of formatting, APA citations, and to request basic "copyediting" services. After reviewing the documents, however, the writing consultants frequently identified macrostructural organization concerns as a more pressing issue. It was not uncommon for writing consultants to direct students in the use of prewriting practices such as developing a regular writing schedule, outlining, and topic sentences (see, for example, the guidance in Ellison; Lester and Lester 2007, 2008; McGuire; Sternberg). This fact meant that writing consultants recognized that students needed APA and formatting guidance but determined that the meeting time was better spent on other aspects of the writing process. Writing consultants noted that it would be helpful if the students practiced these prewriting and organizational techniques before they spent time writing a document to bring to the writing center.

This recognition led to conversations about designing a self-paced, online, asynchronous writing course that students could use for supplemental writing instruction throughout the dissertation process. I recognized, however, the writing development at the graduate level often required personalized mentorship that fostered the writer's unique authorial voice. As a result, I wanted to survey the most common topics addressed by our writing consultants to discern which topics could be better addressed through a self-paced, online writing course. In short, I wanted to gather some quantitative data to confirm what I heard anecdotally from the writing consultants to ensure that any writing course would meet the students' identifiable needs.

## DATA COLLECTION AND FINDINGS

Following the principles of "improvement science" (Perry et al.), I had previously designed a data collection system to track the students' top writing needs and the writing consultants' labor hours. When I first launched the writing center, I designed a writing consultation log where writing consultants could report who they met with, how much time they spent, and what topics they addressed. I encouraged the writing consultants to fill out the writing consultation log after every meeting; however, I found that I often had to check at the end of the week to identify any "missed" appointments and send reminder emails. Although this fact highlights a potential limitation of the data from the log, its final numbers cohered with expected trends during each term, suggesting that the data collection was still close enough to be useful for determining broad trends among the students. Between the summer and fall of 2019, the number of students working

on their dissertations more than doubled from 45 to 99. Following this trend, the writing consultants reviewed nearly twice as many documents (205 in the summer and 478 in the fall). Thus, while it is possible that some consultations were not logged, the data collected still yielded reliable insights into the writing needs of the program's students. Furthermore, the writing consultants and I archived every reviewed student document and its feedback, allowing me to audit the written feedback when the logged data was incomplete. Having access to multiple types of data allowed for data triangulation, by which I could confirm the accuracy and reliability of my assessment (Denzin).

Over the first two terms of data collection (summer and fall of 2019), the writing center provided feedback on 682 documents. Most documents (82 %) were from students beginning their dissertations. As such, this was the first time they worked on a thesis-length project that would exceed the typical length and organizational conventions of many of their class papers.

For developing the writing course, I wanted to examine the writing consultation trends to determine if any regular topics could be better communicated through an asynchronous online module. As such, I followed three steps to analyze the data. First, I reviewed the writing consultation log notes for the summer and fall of 2019, and I divided the types of writing feedback into three categories: macrostructural writing concerns, microstructural writing concerns, and style guide assistance. Second, I examined the log notes within each category to identify the most prominent trends in how writing consultants addressed those issues. Third, I explored the writing skills taught or workshopped within these trends to identify specific tasks that could be communicated through asynchronous writing modules. This process led to the following findings concerning the students' writing needs.

### Macrostructural Writing Needs

As expected, the most addressed topics in these writing consultations were macrostructural writing concerns. Although students often came with technical questions about citations and formatting, most of the consultations were spent on writing organization, personal writing practices, outlining, and topic sentences. In the first term, 139 of 204 writing consultations (68 %) addressed these macrostructural writing needs. This high frequency stood in stark contrast to the 18 appointments addressing APA (8 %) and one appointment on formatting (0.5 %). This trend continued during the second term (fall 2019), during which writing consultants addressed macrostructural writing concerns on 192 of the 478 documents (40 %), compared with 12 instances of APA (2.5 %) and 29 instances of formatting guidance (6 %).

While these findings aligned with my expectations, they raised the challenge of determining how best to provide supplementary online writing instruction to students. Providing guidance on a document's macrostructure tends to be highly individualized depending upon students' writing styles, topics, and arguments. Students often came to the writing center with a draft of a document in which the writing consultant identified organizational issues. I determined that the best way to address this issue was to help students think about writing organization earlier in the writing process before they come to the writing center. Many writing guides emphasize the importance of adopting organizational strategies before drafting a document, such as prewriting, outlining, and setting aside regular writing times (Ellison; Lester and Lester, *Principles of Writing Research Papers*; Lester and Lester, *The Essential Guide*; McGuire; Sternberg). As a result, when designing the writing course, I decided to focus the "macrostructural organization" components heavily on prewriting practices.

### Microstructure Writing Needs

The second category of topics addressed microstructural writing concerns, which consisted of sentence-level writing concerns, such as grammar, spelling, and clarity. The majority of microstructural writing concerns in the log were "grammar" and the overuse of the "passive voice." There was a substantive shift in the numbers between the summer and fall terms, however. In the summer, the writing consultants reported addressing the passive voice in 65 meetings (32 %) and issues related to grammar in 15 meetings (7 %). These numbers dropped in the fall term with only one logged meeting addressing the passive voice and one logged meeting addressing grammar and syntax issues. This change likely reflected a shift in writing consultant strategies rather than students' needs. During the fall term, I instructed writing consultants to direct students toward learning how to use programs like Spell Check and Grammarly to catch grammatical errors and the overuse of the passive voice. Doing so allowed students to catch many of the "proofreading" types of errors before coming to the writing center. Following this trend, I decided to focus the writing course content on micro-level writing concerns more on how to identify and use the tools necessary to help students self-check their writing rather than on providing tutorials on grammatical rules.

### Style Guide Needs

The third topical category that writing consultants addressed was style guide conventions. The students working on their dissertations were required to use two style guides: the APA Manual and the university formatting style guide. As a

result, writing consultants helped guide students in the proper formatting of citations, bibliographies, tables, figures, headings, and more. Surprisingly, helping students with style guide conventions appeared infrequently in the writing consultation log. Only 8 % of the summer meetings and 2.5 % of the fall meetings focused on APA, and only 0.5 % of summer meetings and 6 % of fall meetings focused on formatting. I knew that the students required support on APA and formatting because I reviewed every dissertation chapter submission for APA and formatting concerns before a faculty advisor approved it. After reviewing the chapters I provided feedback on during these terms, I found that I supplied links to resources and detailed comments related to APA and formatting on every chapter submission.

The fact that I provided feedback on APA and formatting on every chapter submission along with the fact that so few writing consultations spent time discussing these topics suggested to me that while the students required APA and formatting guidance, the writing consultants saw other issues as more pressing to address during the meetings. This observation led me to the conclusion that this online writing course should include a robust repository of resources and tutorials for APA and formatting elements that students could use on their own, thereby allowing writing consultants to focus on more individualized writing concerns during their meetings.

## Summary and Assessment

In summary, the findings from reviewing two terms of notes on 682 documents helped me identify where to focus my efforts when constructing an online writing course. While the majority of writing consultations addressed macrostructural and organizational writing concerns, these concerns were often highly individualized and dependent upon the unique nature of students' topics and arguments. As such, I more heavily emphasized organizational practices in the prewriting stage of the writing process. Concerning microstructural writing concerns, I focused more on equipping students to use spell check software and proofreading strategies rather than providing a review of grammatical principles in the course. Finally, to help students with style guide conventions, I included extensive modules on APA citations and formatting.

While this assessment of the students' writing needs helped me identify the topics to address in this writing course, I still had to determine how best to present them. To inform my approach to the presentation and design, I drew upon the two overarching educational frameworks that guided the program's curriculum design: the CPED framework (Hoffman and Perry; Perry; Perry and Imig) and andragogy (e.g., Merriam et al.; Merriam and Bierema).

## THEORY AND DESIGN: BUILDING AN ONLINE COURSE

To design the course, I drew upon two educational frameworks that guided the EdD-LOC program as a whole: adult learning theory (andragogy) and the CPED framework. These frameworks allowed me to better align the course with the broader educational goals of the EdD-LOC program, thereby supplying vertical curriculum alignment (Posner).

First, I designed the course according to the principles of adult learning theory. Adult learning theory, of course, is a complex and multifaceted scholarly conversation, with various iterations of its core tenets. However, one of the central claims of this theory is that adults approach the learning process with different goals, motivations, intentions, and engagement than children (Merriam et al.; Merriam and Bierema). Adult learning theory claims that adults tend to be more “autonomous” and “self-directed” learners who build upon their past learning and experience. Thus, curriculums designed around adult learning theory should connect new content to students’ past experiences. Additionally, adult learning theory claims that adult learners are more motivated to pursue education that connects to the real-life scenarios with which they engage and that provides concrete benefit to them in their continued professional development (Knowles et al. 6).

Following this educational framework, I designed the course according to a discrete configuration (see Posner 129, 131) that allowed students to jump into specific modules and units without traveling sequentially through the entire course. I still arranged the modules into a sequential order moving from start to finish through the writing process (beginning with prewriting organization and ending with proofreading and formatting). Yet, this construction allowed students to use this supplemental course more like a reference resource than a linear curriculum. I used this design to grant adult learners the self-direction to pursue specific writing topics that interested them. Of course, they could select the modules to pursue in consultation with their writing center consultant and faculty advisor.

The second framework that informed my approach to designing this course was the CPED framework. The CPED framework guides EdD programs to construct a rigorous, practitioner-based terminal degree program that aims to produce scholarly practitioners who can leverage the methodologies and scholarly findings of the academy to lead change in professional practice. As such, I designed this course to show students the practical value of these writing strategies for professional writing.

After identifying the topics to include (see the previous section) and the frameworks to guide the course design, I constructed an eight-module, supplemental, asynchronous online writing course. I designed every module to be a self-contained and independently valuable lesson that did not assume or build



upon the preceding material while explicitly demonstrating the value of these writing practices for professional practice. Each module contains links to external resources and recommended “further reading” sections to encourage students to pursue their interests beyond the constraints of the course. Following the findings from the above-noted assessment of the students’ writing needs, the first four modules focused on prewriting practices, tasks, and skills to facilitate organization later in the writing process.

The first module, titled “Introduction to Writing at BU,” introduces the general method and approach of this course. I demythologize academic writing, introducing academic writing principles as serving one of two purposes: “clarity or conciseness.” I then show how these two purposes are core virtues that translate into a variety of professional writing practices (e.g., memos, emails, press releases, policies, bylaws). This writing course aims to introduce new writing techniques to the students’ “writing toolbox.” Every writing technique that students adopt gives them another tool to use at strategic times to maximize their clarity and conciseness. Just like when adding tools to a toolbox, not everyone feels comfortable using the same tools, but everyone does need to practice to master new tools. I encourage students to try out new writing techniques until they become comfortable enough to add them to their toolbox. I use this metaphor to encourage students to expand the breadth of their writing techniques while allowing them to maintain the agency over their authorial voice. The module then guides them to set up Spell Check, Grammarly, and Zotero—three programs that can help students throughout the writing process. The module then ends with a tutorial on “Personal Practices for Writing Success,” encouraging the students to identify regular writing habits that will sustain them throughout their time in the program.

The second module, titled “Getting Started,” provides organizational prewriting tips and strategies to help students think about organizational strategy early in the writing process. This module contains units on critically engaging sources, prewriting, outlining, and developing a writing plan. It also provides tips on overcoming writer’s block, encouraging students to maintain a consistent writing routine.

The third and fourth modules work together and were designed with support from university librarians. These modules introduce students to the research process using the university libraries as distance education students and strategies to engage sources without plagiarizing. As such, the third module introduces students to the electronic library resources and provides some strategies for discerning the credibility of the sources they encounter. The fourth module reviews basic principles of entering into conversation with their sources, properly attributing words and ideas to their sources, and abiding by relevant copyright laws when pursuing doctoral research.

Whereas the first four modules focused on prewriting organization practices, modules five through eight discuss actual compositional strategies and techniques. These modules provide students with writing strategies and techniques for self-checking their work for clarity and conciseness. The purpose of this strategy is to empower students to revise their work as they learn about new writing strategies.

The fifth module provides lessons on techniques to strengthen the macrostructural organization of content during the drafting process. Module five differs from module two in that module two focuses on the prewriting process whereas module five focuses on techniques to help the organization when drafting a document. Thus, this module reviews practices such as using outlines, topic sentences, transitions, and signposting when writing.

The sixth module focuses on microstructural writing concerns. Since module one encouraged students to set up Grammarly and Spell Check, this module primarily focuses on strategies for proofreading rather than specific elements of grammar and syntax. It also includes tutorials on the most common sentence-level writing concerns (such as reducing the overuse of the passive voice) and reducing bias in academic writing (following APA, chap.5).

The seventh and eighth modules then work together to provide technical guides on the use of APA and the Baylor University formatting guidelines for dissertations. These modules primarily link students to templates and examples and provide tutorials on how to use the template to write according to the necessary style guide. The module then provides practical tips for students to self-check their document's APA and formatting.

In keeping with the principles of “improvement science” that led to the creation of this supplemental writing course, I developed a brief “satisfaction” survey at the end of each module to ask students to rate the module's usefulness on a scale from 1–5 and to describe what strengths they appreciated about the module as well as if there were any topics they would like to see in the future. By tracking the frequency of module use and the students' feedback, I aim to iterate the course over time in light of student, advisor, and writing consultant comments.

## **CONCLUSION: POST-PANDEMIC REFLECTIONS ON A PANDEMIC MOVE TOWARD ONLINE WRITING DEVELOPMENT**

Graduate writing instruction is, by its very nature, highly contextualized depending on the discipline, departmental commitments, program goals, and students' vocational aspirations. This writing course embodies this very challenge, as I designed it to meet the unique needs of the Baylor EdD-LOC scholarly practitioners while reflecting the broader program educational frameworks. Yet, as

online, professional degree programs continue growing at institutions across the nation to provide quality, graduate-level instruction to working professionals who are seeking to hone their skills for industry service, writing courses of this nature will become more needed. To that end, this process and course design provide valuable insight for those seeking to offer online writing development support to professional degree students. This course aims to empower students as learners and writers, balance disciplinary discourse with the formation of students' authorial voices, embody the principles of adult learning theory, and cohere with the vertical curriculum alignment of the broader program—all goals that graduate-level writing courses consider to varying degrees.

I began this process of designing this online writing course before the COVID-19 pandemic pushed so much of higher education online. Yet the insights gained from this pre-pandemic process proved timely for reflecting on designing online writing courses in a pandemic world because the pandemic exacerbated and expanded many of the unique conditions that I tried to navigate when designing this course. In particular, the prioritization of user flexibility became salient in the pandemic educational environment. I initially designed the course to offer self-paced flexibility in accordance with insights from the program's broader education frameworks. While informed by these educational frameworks, this design also met the very practical challenge of providing writing development instruction to working professionals with a wide variety of demands on their schedules. The pandemic exacerbated the challenge of navigating students' schedules, as the regular routines around which so many courses are designed were instantly disrupted. While some students found themselves working less due to the quarantine, others found themselves working extra, unanticipated hours as they made rapid adjustments within their organizations to provide services in online capacities. Students with families and extensive responsibilities outside of school found their regular support systems disrupted, such as child care. Flexibility became a key component to helping students continue their education journeys during the pandemic (Fisher et al.). By building flexibility into course designs, writing instructors can make courses more accessible for students with inconsistent schedules as well as make the course design more resilient for pandemic-like situations in which students experience a sudden change to the demands on their calendars.

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# Making a P-A-T-H to Transformation: Showcasing the Need for Culturally Inclusive Discussion-Based Teaching in the Online Classroom

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## CONTEXTUALIZING ONLINE TEACHING PRACTICES AND INSTRUCTOR ROLES

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared COVID- 19 a global pandemic, which effectively moved much of our lives online—including our educational learning experiences. In fact, UNESCO reported that in-person school closings affected approximately 70 % of students globally. The shift to online teaching and learning required instructors, many of whom had never engaged in online teaching, to quickly adapt their courses using one of three commonly employed online educational models: synchronous (live class meetings via an online platform, e.g., Zoom), asynchronous (a fully online classroom with no live meetings), or hybrid (a mix of online meetings and in-person sessions). Florence Martin et al. observe a dire need for more professional development surrounding online teaching and learning. As they mention, and this chapter is meant to address, we must gather more research and explore the pedagogical practices instructors are effectively utilizing in the online classroom

“to investigate the kind and level of expertise required among instructors to perform various roles in online teaching based on sound research methodologies” (184). It is our hope that the lessons we have learned and discussed here will benefit your online classroom and pedagogical practices in profoundly productive ways and that you might be able to adopt and/or adapt our findings to meet your own course objectives.

According to professors of Education Dennis Beck and Richard E. Ferdig, when moving to online teaching spaces and embedding technology into the course “the role of the teacher transformed from teacher-centered to student-centered, low-interaction to high-interaction, and low-initiator to high-initiator.” Thus, though many aspects of strong teaching pedagogy transfer smoothly from in-person courses to online spaces, we must consider that there is “a paradigm shift regarding instructional time and space, virtual management techniques, and the ability to engage students through virtual communication” (Easton 87). The course Learning Management System (LMS) (e.g., Canvas, Blackboard, Moodle), also referred to as the Course Management System (CMS), is a chief technological tool used to facilitate learning in online spaces (Legon and Garrett 44). The threaded discussion areas within the LMS often become a leading arena for dialogue in an online course. Additionally, there are a multitude of platforms outside of the LMS which instructors may use to generate social interaction and discussion (e.g., Google Docs, Voice Thread, MindMeister, Pinup.com). In this chapter, we highlight how virtual discussions can be employed both within the traditional LMS and beyond to illustrate the power of creating engaging and meaningful dialogue in the online classroom.

In her 2016 text *Minds Online*, Michelle Miller posits that online courses tend to rely heavily on written text, even more so than the typical face-to-face classroom, leading students who are less adept readers and writers to face extra challenges with navigating course materials (27–28). To address these challenges, James M. Lang argues for a pedagogical approach that involves what he calls “small teaching” where he examines how professors can make small adaptations to a class that can become powerful change agents for students (*Small Teaching* 5). Here, we showcase how the creation of inclusive “small teaching” acts within online discussion boards can assist students in the transformational learning and deep, meaningful thinking and engagement that we aim for. For example, “small teaching” can involve giving students more availability of choice to create stronger investments in an assignment and thus more of a willingness to work on difficult writing and/or reading tasks. Another example involves embedding more “thinking” and reflecting time through prewriting or post-writing activities on the discussion board. We also argue that instructors should move away from viewing discussion as solely a point of assessment and instead take a more goal-driven approach that considers the purpose of each discussion as it relates to the course



objectives and the overall learning process. Ultimately, our goal is to demonstrate how making a few “small” and easy-to-implement modifications can help instructors reimagine online discussion, foster inclusivity, and facilitate student community, learning, and agency to create a more impactful learning experience for all students.

## A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK SURROUNDING DISCUSSION IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

Discussion in the online classroom can offer benefits not available in the face-to-face space. As Carmen S. Dixon notes in her piece “The Three E’s of Online Discussion,” dialoguing in the virtual classroom is advantageous because “busy teachers and students can add to a discussion at their convenience, print out discussion prompts and replies, reflect on them for a while, and then contribute a thoughtful, well-formulated answer.” Further, Dixon adds that “online discussion increases participation and fosters a better sense of community because students feel more comfortable, whether because of anonymity or confidence issues.” Dixon further asserts that “instructors have added time with their students because they get more time to communicate and engage after class hours.”

Dialoguing in the online realm can be broken into two categories: intrapersonal and interpersonal. Intrapersonal dialogue is primarily focused on the individual and how they go about learning to think and write/read critically: “Learning is mediated by intrapersonal dialogue; this dialogue type is an all-inclusive term for the mental processes engaged in by students as they purposefully try to learn” (Gorsky and Caspi 139). In other words, students are engaging in intrapersonal dialogue when they think about the class material as they read instructional texts, listen back to previous class recordings, or engage with additional educational materials. As Gorsky and Caspi maintain:

The most significant element of intrapersonal dialogue is the individual learner, not the structural resources....Each learner, at any given time, is characterised by a constellation of variables that include, amongst others, his or her goals for the course, prior knowledge, motivation, intelligence, and anxiety. These variables determine the extent of intrapersonal dialogue that occurs and, to a large degree, its quality and effectiveness. (Gorsky and Caspi 139)

It is our argument that the learner still is the most significant aspect in the classroom space online. Discussion boards in the virtual classroom offer a widely used structural space that continually enables and reinforces the learning process. This second aspect of discussion necessary to critical thinking and learning, is known as interpersonal dialoguing and facilitates learning as it relates both to the social

environment and the subject matter being discussed (Bruner; Dewey; Freire; Vygotsky). As such, interpersonal dialogue plays an important role in the theoretical framework we employ to explore discussion in the online environment. Gorsky and Caspi posit that the structural definition of interpersonal dialogue illustrates “dialogue [a]s a message loop; it may be instructor–student–instructor or student–instructor–student or student A–student B–student A” (139). They add that “dialogue has two distinct classes of outputs: social and subject matter oriented” and that “messages in a dialogue are mutually coherent” and must be in order to be useful to the learning process (139). Moreover, a sense of “Attention must be given to establishing and sustaining appropriate social presence if the full potential of a community of inquiry is to be realized” (Garrison 26). It is our goal to explore the advantageous features of both intrapersonal and interpersonal dialogue, strategically examining how they help professors create and sustain culturally inclusive discussions in the online classroom.

## CULTURALLY INCLUSIVE DISCUSSION-BASED TEACHING

An “inclusive pedagogy” is critical to effective online teaching as it:

Deliberately cultivat[es] a learning environment where all students are treated equitably, have access to learning, and feel welcome, valued, and supported in their learning. Such teaching attends to social identities and seeks to change the ways systemic inequities shape dynamics in teaching-learning spaces, affect individuals’ experiences of those spaces, and influence course and curriculum design. (Center for Research on Learning and Teaching)

Generating an inclusive online classroom space occurs when students believe their ideas, views, and contributions are being heard and valued by those around them. It is just as important to construct and sustain inclusive discussion prompts and assignments as it is to make inclusivity a key, larger pedagogical goal. In the following section, we describe how instructors can create a “culturally inclusive discussion-based teaching pedagogy” by embedding one or more of the following four aspects into their online discussion assignments to generate a more inclusive model for dialoguing in online spaces. By examining the importance of 1. *Purposeful Thinking*, 2. *Alternatives and Choice*, 3. *Teaching Collaboration as Agency*, and 4. *Hindsight and Metacognitive Reflection* we can create what we deem to be, a new P-A-T-H to equitable learning and multiple means for engagement. Integrating this P-A-T-H can benefit both teachers and students as individuals of the classroom community as well as empower them as members of the broader online classroom collective.

## TAKING A NEW P-A-T-H TO TEACHING ONLINE DISCUSSION WITH INCLUSIVITY IN MIND

### The Power of Purposeful Thinking

One of the first ways teachers should (re)examine their online discussion activities is with an eye towards purposeful thinking, both our own thought processes as instructors regarding the creation and implementation of discussion-based assignments, as well as asking students to engage in and cultivate thoughtful, critically aware responses. We must ask ourselves such questions as: What objective(s) are we trying to achieve when we ask students to participate in a particular online discussion board prompt or examine a question about a class reading in breakout rooms during a synchronous session on Zoom? Do our students have access to things like stable, reliable Internet access and easy-to-review voice recordings after our class sessions of the discussion? What information are we asking students to access and what does “including students” in the discussion mean in terms of their representation and power in the virtual classroom? What do students need to know to fulfill our expectations and how can we disseminate this information in a way that is clear, concise, and to the point?

We maintain one of the most important aspects of constructing productive online discussion is to create the activity with intention. The more purposeful and clear we are with our assignment intentions, the more students will be able to understand and engage critically with the goals and course objectives. For instance, by purposefully highlighting source requirements and assignment descriptions, along with rubric details and/or information about why we collect sources, who they matter to, and how and why we work to build our ethos as academics, students will not only better understand *what* is being asked of them but also *why* it matters. In other words, providing the explanation behind the assignment and what purpose it serves can help students see their work as meaningful and worthy of their engagement, rather than busy work to simply “get through.”

### Alternatives and Choice as a Way to Empower Students

One way to make discussions in the virtual classroom more inclusive and empowering is to present students with alternatives, creating a sense of choice in their own learning. There are many small places we can offer students options. One is through the assignment expectations, such as allowing students to select the genre for their submission (e.g., a traditional discussion board post or creating an infographic or pamphlet, etc.) or giving them a say in the logistical details of the assignment (e.g., a choice of possible due dates). For instance, first-year writing

students can be given the opportunity either to complete their 12-page essay in four parts or to submit the full draft all at once. Both scenarios involve instructor feedback and revision, but the choice for when to submit the first draft allows students the flexibility to consider their own personal writing schedules, think about how they want to engage in the writing process, and determine how to balance outside life commitments (e.g., jobs, family). Another instance of choice involves letting students decide which assignments will count towards their grade. For example, we can give them the chance to compile their best work for the semester, offering the chance to opt out of X number of assignments in order to showcase their best work (e.g., there are 15 discussion posts but only the highest 12 scores count).

In addition to logistical matters, choice should be given to students to allow for multiple means of self-representation throughout the course. In their book *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Higher Education*, experts Thomas J. Tobin and Kirsten T. Behling suggest teachers provide opportunities for multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression (2). For example, Introductory Psychology students can choose which topic to explore for their reflection paper (e.g., sensation and perception, human development, social psychology) or which examples given inspire the creation of their own project. Moreover, choice might be afforded by asking students to rewrite a discussion board post(s) to reflect a different audience, purpose, or manner of expression.

Such choice and decision-making have a number of benefits. They can ignite investment in the assignment, allowing students to focus on the topics they are most interested in and intrigued by. Moreover, offering variability allows for flexibility where students who find themselves overcommitted in a given week can opt out of a post with no consequences (knowing that they get those three “free” posts). This is particularly beneficial in an inclusive teaching model, as it levels the playing field for those with out-of-school responsibilities (i.e., jobs, childcare). Additionally, including choice aids in building student-teacher rapport, as it helps students view the instructor as understanding, caring, and respectful of their time and other commitments. Further, students learn to see the classroom as more of a democracy than a dictatorship.

In his piece “The Promising Syllabus,” James M. Lang refers to Ken Bain’s popular book *What the Best College Teachers Do*, pointing out that Bain finds that the best and most promising course syllabus “fundamentally recognizes that people will learn best and most deeply when they have a strong sense of control over their own education rather than feeling manipulated by someone else’s demands.” We argue that giving students this sense of control and a say in one’s own educational experiences is crucial for students to feel valued, supported, and respected and is necessary for real learning to occur in the online classroom. Moreover,

allowing students to respond to discussion boards in mediums and means consistent with their strengths can add to their feelings of empowerment and help to level the playing field for students whose strengths lie in areas other than writing (e.g., creativity, emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills). There are multiple, distinct types of intellectual competencies (Gardner), so offering a variety of carefully constructed assessment tools allows us to better meet the overall needs of learners who excel in different domains.

### Teaching Collaboration as Agency

In addition to employing the vital and necessary acts of purposeful thinking and the allowance of choice in our discussion assignments, collaboration can provide students with a clear pathway to invaluable, inclusive learning and engagement, particularly in an online setting where students do not get to interact frequently with their classmates. The online classroom can also lack the diverse array of situational teaching moments, either intentionally or unintentionally constructed, that are present in the face-to-face classroom. Thus, discussion can become an integral part of how students can collaborate in the classroom, and it is important to note that:

Students must feel familiar with their surroundings in order to draw them into the thoughts of the class. But in an online discussion format, students....do not get to know each other, and probably are not comfortable making discussion points or critiquing the work of someone they have never met. (Dixon)

Building community in the online classroom from the first day involves allowing everyone to get to know each other as more than just names. We suggest including a “welcome post” where students share some basic information about themselves—name, year, major, fun fact, and a picture. This practice of inclusion not only allows the students to learn more about one another but allows the students to find common ground with each other from the opening moments of the course. Furthermore, it provides the instructor with a chance to get a better sense of their students’ interests.

Another strategy towards inclusive building community involves structuring the discussion board to require regular contact and engagement (Dixon), such as the “post once, reply twice” model where students provide an initial response to the instructor’s prompt and then also reply to two of their peers’ posts. Further, it is crucial to clearly articulate “discussion etiquette” and important features of netiquette (Maddix 378). This includes reminding students that online environments lack the social and contextual cues present during in-person interactions, so sarcasm or jokes could easily be misconstrued, as well as avoiding acronyms or abbreviations and not writing in all caps (Dixon; Maddix 379). Fostering a sense

of collective community within the online discussion forum creates a safe space for transformative and inclusive learning to occur.

### Hindsight and Metacognitive Reflection as a Way of Taking a Moment to Critically Explore Content and Self

Finally, we believe that a truly inclusive discussion should allow time for reflection—before, during, and after an activity. For instance, allowing students the opportunity to participate in what we call “Discussion Board Pre-writing” can give students an open space where they can simply have time to free write and think about their opinions and what their evidentiary support might be in relation to what we have discussed or will discuss in that day’s course material without having to worry about speed and accuracy of thought through a graded work.

Additionally, during the course of class discussion, we like to stop and do a 1-minute free write (this works best in a synchronous or hybrid class) asking students what ideas they relate the most to and why, what they are thinking about the larger implications of the ideas being discussed (e.g., culturally, politically, socially, economically), what questions they have, etc. This can provide a space for instructors to identify gaps in what we are teaching and what students are learning. As well, such a momentary pause gives students time to collect their thoughts and moreover, consider the views of others and/or make time for the reading of other students’ ideas and thoughts on the discussion board.

It is also necessary for professors to engage in more reflective, metacognitive analysis of their teaching habits. We often keep a “Reflective Journal,” taking just 5–10 minutes after each class or week is over to offer insights into what seems to be working, why, what students seem to have included in the discussions and for what reasons as well as who isn’t in the conversations and perhaps why. Such reflections can give us a clearer picture of what we are doing and need to do to make our online classroom a more productive and powerful space for meaningful learning.

## **PRACTICAL EXAMPLES USEFUL FOR EMPLOYING ONLINE DISCUSSION IN VIRTUAL SPACES**

In the following section, we provide examples highlighting the theoretical and practical content discussed in the portions above. We hope that such instances framed within our P-A-T-H model of culturally inclusive discussion-based teaching will aid in the development of discussion assignments for your courses.

### Example 1: The “Standard” Prompt

Let’s consider an Introductory Psychology course doing a unit on “Memory.” Suppose students were provided with a prompt and asked to reply publicly on the LMS discussion forum. The prompt and response might look something like this:

- Prompt:* This week we learned that our memories are far from perfect. Describe a time where your memory failed you.
- Student Response:* A time when my memory failed me was when I first met my best friend. She had a pretty unique name, so it was hard to remember. I know this because I didn’t receive the name correctly to be able to remember her name. But to fix it she gave me a nickname that was closer to her name, but in the end I just kept using her real name until it was stuck in my head. To improve my memory the best for me I feel I need to just go over things over and over again til im repeating it without having it right in front of me.

As you likely noticed, there are challenges here that could be addressed by employing the P-A-T-H to inclusive teaching framework. The prompt does not facilitate *purposeful thinking*, as it is vague and lacks clear and specific requirements and student expectations. Furthermore, and perhaps more problematic, this prompt does not challenge students to engage with the course material. Students, in this instance, are unable to showcase their knowledge and thinking in relation to the course content. While some of the more industrious students may pull in key course topics, many will generate a simplistic answer to the prompt that, while it may technically address what the prompt requires, will not foster learning. As you see, this student was able to answer the question being asked without pulling in any evidence or course concepts. This lack of purposeful thinking by the instructor in creating the assignment leads to the student being unable to embrace this discussion activity fully, thus illustrating a clear need to restructure the prompt because students are not given the chance to engage in important critical thinking skills. Additionally, the expectations and requirements for the response are not clear—there are no guidelines offered for completing the task (e.g., length, elements to include, order of ideas)—making it nearly impossible for the student to understand it and think critically about their role in the discussion and their specific response. Providing clear expectations and requirements will not only improve transparency and reduce students’ stress levels at the thought of trying to read your mind but will improve the overall quality of the assignment.

In the above example, this prompt further leaves far too much space for students to offer anecdotes without analysis of their implications and importance. *Metacognitive reflection* could be a valuable avenue to learning here if added in differently. We must remember too that while learner-driven approaches that allow

students to connect the course material to their real lives are a great way to help the material sink in through ways that students will remember past the end of the course, this must be done thoughtfully. As we saw, the response was simply a story about the student's life, rather than an analysis of the fallibility of memories. This is problematic not only in terms of adequately addressing course concepts, but it raises important confidentiality issues if a student talks about personal or sensitive information in their post. Students should be encouraged to draw on their own life experiences, but in a way that is safe and confidential. Additionally, this prompt does not leave space for students to connect the material back to their own lives, which is essential for retention.

Building off what we learned from the last example, there are several transformations we can make to increase the learning utility of the discussion board assignment that contribute to a more inclusive learning experience. Below we include a revised version of the same discussion prompt for memory, analyzed through our P-A-T-H to inclusive teaching:

*Prompt:* This week we learned that our memories are far from perfect. Describe a time where your memory failed you. First, explain what happened. Was the memory failure in regards to an event, a piece of information, a person, or a place? After explaining the situation, identify the type of memory error you experienced. For example, was it a retrieval failure, an encoding failure, or even a false memory? Explain in detail what this type of error was, and what you could have done differently to prevent the memory error from occurring. Finally, applying what we've learned in this chapter, describe at least one way in which you can improve your memory skills in the future.

Unlike the previous iteration, this prompt demands students engage in *purposeful thinking*. Whereas the first example was vague and offered a less nuanced version of what students needed to do in terms of course content, this one is much more specific. There are now multiple “sub-prompts” where students are asked to consider the overarching topic (memory) from a variety of different perspectives. Before, there was no need to draw on course concepts to earn full points on the prompt. But now, students must identify the type of memory error—meaning they need to first understand what a memory error is and the different types that can occur. Furthermore, providing examples of memory errors eliminates confusion regarding what one is looking for. While this prompt allows for a learner-driven response, there is more structure and less room for anecdotes. Students are still being asked to think about their own memories, but here they are being offered far more guidance in terms of how to respond. The prompt itself does not address guidelines for completing the task, but we suggest providing a link to the rubric and assignment guidelines posted on the LMS. This allows students to easily



review the assignment description before submitting and helps to eliminate issues with not meeting assignment expectations (i.e., length). This prompt lends itself well to the “post once, reply twice” model. Dixon argues that online discussion necessitates placing extra emphasis on humanizing interactions, so students learn to see the people behind the post. Providing thorough and thoughtful discussion prompts that allow students to share personal stories safely while also backed by evidence can help build a stronger sense of classroom community (3).

### Example 2: The “Creative” Prompt

Thus far, we’ve focused on the more traditional discussion prompts and assignments that require a written response from students. There are variations, and a more creative version of the discussion board prompt can be helpful in giving students opportunities for *alternatives and choice* as a means of empowerment and the emergence of a more multifaceted view of representation and expression in the online classroom. Offering students the option to respond to a prompt via a variety of creative mediums (e.g., poster, video, PowerPoint presentation) may be an effective strategy towards creating a more diverse and inclusive classroom. There’s also the added benefit that allowing students the opportunity to be creative with their assignments creates an increased sense of ownership and agency in their work.

Consider the following prompt from a Lifespan Development course which asks students to examine the role of teratogens in prenatal development. Rather than submitting an essay, students are encouraged to express their creativity by designing an educational infographic:

*Prompt:* This week we talked about the prenatal environment and the labor and delivery process. For this discussion board, let’s get a little creative! Imagine you have just begun a new role working with women of child bearing age to create healthy and positive pregnancy experiences. You’ve been assigned to create a marketing campaign designed to encourage healthy lifestyles and smooth pregnancies leading to healthy babies. Choose a teratogen that has not yet been discussed by a classmate and design an educational pamphlet, flyer, or poster. Please be sure to address the following, although you’ll also need to include your own ideas:

- What are the main elements you will emphasize to women who are or may become pregnant?
- What lifestyle practices will you recommend they either begin, continue, minimize, or cease altogether?
- What is the main take home message you would like to share with the women?

Note that the same principles of a strong discussion prompt still apply—providing multiple clear sub-prompts, the opportunity for engagement in a way that protects confidentiality while still encouraging academic rigor. Below, consider a few student responses to this prompt (see Figures 11.1, 11.2, and 11.3).

We can tell you from experience that these prompts are often exciting to grade and the creativity applied by students can be astounding. Further, the students often collaborate throughout the process with each other, with the instructor, and with the course texts to create the best project possible. It is in such collaborations that the students often come to recognize their own voices and see where they side in the academic conversations at hand. Decisions such as which genre to use, what information to include, and how the audience will perceive the project all allow students additional time for *purposeful thinking*.

Consider these comments from the end-of-semester course evaluations about how students found value and purpose in these creative discussion forum projects. One student mentioned, “The format of the assignment and the variety to choose from made it enjoyable and informative to read other students’ work.” Another student highlighted how “I enjoy them [the creative prompts that employ diverse genre options]. They make me think about the material we learned during the week in a meaningful way.” Such responses speak to the agency students feel in being able to present their work in a medium that they are comfortable with and proud of and further the collaborative spirit of meaningful learning that arises as a result of engaging with the course texts or reading other students’ projects. Other students mentioned that “I honestly hate doing discussion posts, but you made it interesting with the posters and everything” and “I really enjoyed a lot of the activities. I noticed I would get very involved and interested in them which allowed me to get a better understanding of the material.” Such remarks suggest the power and agency established when allowing students to choose their response type (e.g., poster, pamphlet, video). Though “small teaching” strategies, these efforts can have a large impact on student learning.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Our goal in this chapter was two-fold. First, we worked to situate online discussion boards within our P-A-T-H framework, maintaining the importance of giving students opportunities for: *Purposeful thinking*, *Alternatives and choice*, *Teaching collaboration as agency*, and *Hindsight and metacognitive thinking*. We are not suggesting that instructors use all elements of the framework at all times when creating inclusive discussions in their online classrooms. Instead, we contend that teachers consider these elements as they are putting together a discussion-based assignment or activity and examine how the P-A-T-H framework can help shape


## Substance Abuse and Pregnancy: Cocaine

### WHAT IS COCAINE AND WHAT DOES IT DO?

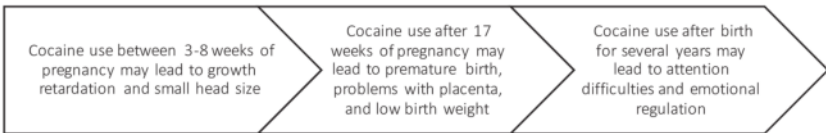
COCAINE IS A CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM STIMULANT. IT INTERFERES WITH CHEMICALS INVOLVED IN THE TRANSMISSION OF NEUROLOGICAL SIGNALS.

INCREASED LEVELS OF NOREPINEPHRINE CAUSED BY THE USE OF COCAINE ENABLES THE COCAINE TO ACCUMULATE AT NERVE TERMINALS. IN PREGNANT WOMEN, THIS RESULTS IN THE CONSTRICTION OF MATERNAL BLOOD VESSELS AS WELL AS HYPERTENSION AT THE SITE WHERE THE UTERUS AND PLACENTA ATTACH.



DISRUPTION OF BLOOD FLOW TO THE UTERUS AND PLACENTA MAY RESULT IN TACHYCARDIA, INCREASED RISK FOR VENTRICULAR ARRHYTHMIAS, AND AMNION RUPTURE, WHICH CAUSES LIMB DEFECTS IN THE FETUS. 

### WHAT HAPPENS TO THE BABY WHEN COCAINE IS USED TO DURING PREGNANCY?



**IF YOU ARE OR MAY BECOME PREGNANT, YOU NEED TO STOP COCAINE USE IMMEDIATELY.**

### WHAT ARE YOUR OPTIONS?



**START A FITNESS ROUTINE**

**JOIN A REHAB PROGRAM**

**START A NEW HOBBY**

**TALK TO OTHERS**

**HELP IS AVAILABLE:**

**1-800-662-4357**

Figure 11.1: Prenatal Development Poster: Substance Use During Pregnancy

Source: Jessica Hallett



Figure 11.2: Prenatal Development Poster: Alcohol During Pregnancy

Source: Kyleigh Overholt

and affect how our students perceive and negotiate their education online. This model can provide a more integrative, culturally-aware look into how we might gain perspective into the more fundamental aspects of an inclusive discussion in the online classroom.

Moreover, this chapter provides examples of the P-A-T-H framework at work to demonstrate how these “small teaching” practices can make a big impact. These suggestions are not meant to be prescriptive, and it is our hope that you will bring them into your classroom in whatever way fits with your individual situation and continue to add to the ideas we have already presented with new applications of your own. We recognize that the implementation of particular classroom techniques depends on individual circumstances, yet we cannot ignore the critical work of inclusive pedagogy, and more specifically here, we must recognize the value and importance of employing inclusive discussion in our online classrooms.

# Alcohol is a Teratogen



## Know the facts. Don't drink while pregnant

Figure 11.3. Prenatal Development Poster: Substance Use During Pregnancy

Source: Ashley Stroh

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# Reconfiguring Peer Feedback for the Virtual Composition Classroom

DENNIS KOYAMA AND GHADA GHERWASH

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The demand for online learning existed before the COVID-19 pandemic (Baturay 427; Gaebel et al. 7); however, the transition to remote instruction was complicated by the converging realities of a given instructor's abilities to adjust their pre-pandemic pedagogy to meet the needs of students learning in online contexts. The April 22, 2020 "Digital Learning Pulse Survey" on the Online Learning Consortium website (OLC) reports that 97 % of the 641 US-based higher education institutions respondents "had to call on faculty with no previous online teaching experience" with only 50 % of the institutions indicating that some of their faculty had some online teaching experience. When the COVID-19 pandemic began, our experiences reflected the overtones of the OLC survey results, where only a handful of faculty members at our respective institutions had online teaching experience prior to the pandemic. This placed a huge demand on the few faculty who had the knowledge and expertise in online teaching pedagogy. From our respective institutions, we found that limited access to materials, people, etc. changed the rules for online learning even for those who already had experiences teaching online. This, too, aligned with the findings of the OLC survey, which reports that 56 % of the surveyed faculty had to "use teaching methods they had never used before." One striking statistic was that "even experienced online instructors had to improvise as they went along, with more than one-half (51 %) using new teaching methods for these newly online courses." This survey result shines a light on how complex and ambiguous the teaching and learning had

become due to the circumstances created by the pandemic as even experienced online instructors struggled.

To make sense of our ambiguous situations and the nebular plans emerging at our respective institutions, and considering the urgency and novelty of the pandemic, we sought support from each other despite living and working in different countries and institutions. While seeking to collaborate with one another was not new to us, it might need a little unpacking to explain why relying on each other was an obvious option for us.

Although we currently work at different institutions, we were classmates in graduate school, and we regularly took classes together and collaborated on research projects. We also taught different sections of the same composition course, shared teaching materials, and conducted collaborative reflective practices and peer observations of teaching during our time in the program. Immediately prior to the pandemic, we were in regular contact as we were working on a research project. At first, the pandemic was an add-on to the end of our meetings and emails, but it soon became the topic of our communications.

Relying on others when confusion replaces routine probably seems like common sense to most people, and the literature supports this observation. Cressey notes collaborative reflections have been identified as a tool to help people “process and reformulate” their actions when facing uncertain and perplexing realities (61–62). Howard and Johnson found that teachers dealing with stressful situations and circumstances regularly employ individual and collaborative reflective practices (410–12). One reason why collaboration and reflection may be regularly invoked in challenging times might be understood through Farrell and Kennedy’s assertion that collaborating colleagues reflecting on their contexts and situations can “decide the appropriateness of each aspect of [teaching] practice for a particular context” (2). The versatility of reflection is perhaps another reason why it is an integral part of finding solutions in and making sense of unclear situations, as Clarà identified reflection as “a thinking process” that is “a descriptive notion—not a prescriptive one” (261). Clarà’s characterization of reflection as a non-prescriptive process echoes Bransford’s suggestion that reflection can engage teachers in ways that push them outside of their routine, making them more intentional in their planning and teaching practices whereby they notice options and approaches they may have otherwise failed to notice (197).

While our collaborations informed a range of changes to our composition courses to meet our students’ immediate needs, in this chapter we mainly focus on peer feedback. In the sections that follow, we provide a brief description of our institutional contexts and backgrounds. We then provide details of the successful changes and the challenges presented by the shift to remote instruction, and how the process of collaboratively thinking about and discussing our options and contexts made us more intentional in our planning and teaching practices. We



conclude with a brief discussion on what we have learned from the shift and how it will affect our future teaching practices.

## CONTEXTS AND BACKGROUNDS

### Ghada's Institutional, Classroom, and Professional Contexts

At the time of the pandemic, Ghada was a multilingual writing specialist, interim director of the Colby Writing Program (CWP), and assistant professor of writing at Colby College, Maine. Colby is a private, residential, liberal arts college with an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 2,000 students—roughly 10 % are international and about 20 % are multilingual. When the pandemic started, Colby was in week six of the semester and in the last week of in-person instruction before spring recess. To accommodate preparations for remote teaching, Colby extended spring recess for a week. Ghada had already shared the course materials (e.g., syllabus, assignment sheets, readings) through the course's Moodle page and conducted twelve in-person class sessions, seventy-five minutes each.

The Colby Writing Program (CWP) offers themed first-year writing (FYW) classes under the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) model. FYW courses are guided by a shared set of common goals that faculty adhere to as they develop their courses. Colby students are expected to take one FYW course during their first year. The FYW class discussed here was designed to promote cross-cultural dialogues among domestic and international students. To promote cross-cultural dialogue, and since this FYW class is typically overenrolled, Ghada worked with the Registrar to reduce enrollments while creating a diverse class, aiming for an even split between international and domestic students (Gherwash, 2022). During the course of the semester, and across five major assignments in different genres, students produce 15–20 pages of polished writing. The course uses the writing-as-a-process approach, where students receive peer and instructor feedback on their drafts. The course also includes a trained writing center tutor who facilitates in-class peer-feedback sessions and provides additional writing tutorials to students outside of class time.

The course uses structured peer—feedback workshops, where students work in pre-assigned groups of four to give and receive guided feedback from their peers. In a given peer-feedback session, students bring three hard copies of their draft to share with their feedback group. Students are given three copies of a feedback form (see Appendix A) to complete for each draft they read. These assignment-specific feedback forms are designed to help students provide feedback related to the requirements of that assignment. For example, the annotated bibliography feedback form asks students to locate the research question(s), evaluate the

effectiveness of the summaries, and assess the relevance of the sources in each of their peers' drafts. Sessions begin with authors taking turns reading their papers aloud to their group, peers would fill out the peer-feedback form, and sessions concluded with the group's oral feedback in addition to the peer-feedback form. Students usually spend 15 minutes on each paper and about 5 minutes on feedback, written and oral.

### Dennis' Institutional, Classroom, and Professional Contexts

When the pandemic spread to Japan, Dennis was an assistant professor of rhetoric and composition and co-director of the Writing Center, in the Faculty<sup>1</sup> of Liberal Arts (FLA) at Sophia University, Tokyo. Sophia University is a highly selective, small, private, liberal arts college that uses Japanese as the primary language of instruction. However, although Sophia University is the home of the FLA, English is the language of instruction and English is used for interactions between students, faculty, and staff in the FLA. Faculty meetings are conducted entirely in English as are other interactions, such as students meeting with the Faculty Chair<sup>2</sup> for permission to study abroad. As such, the FLA is often described as a US liberal arts college housed within a Japanese university. The FLA enrolls approximately 110 students in each the spring and fall semesters, and most incoming students are multilingual (less than 10 % are monolingual English speakers). When the pandemic started, Sophia University was on winter recess. Syllabi for courses had been uploaded to the university server, and course websites and materials were well under construction. As the incoming students had not taken any classes at Sophia University, and based on his prior terms of teaching in the FLA contexts, Dennis knew it would be highly unlikely that any student would know any of their classmates and similarly will not have had any social interactions with them. Therefore, working social interactions into the online version of the introduction to Academic Literacy (AL) course became an important concern for his planning.

The introductory academic literacies (AL) course is part of a suite of three rhetoric and composition courses that are complemented by courses in critical thinking (taken in the second term) and public speaking (a third term course). Generally, less than 15 % of an incoming class is placed into this introductory course, and the remainder of the students are placed into Rhetoric and Composition 1. The course uses the writing-as-a-process approach and employs five major writing tasks using different genres. In addition to the major writing assignments, students complete shorter writing assignments (between 500–700 words) that encourage them to reflect on their learning (by keeping and sharing learning journals with their classmates) and to share their perspectives on a class reading (by writing reading reflections to discuss in small groups). Through the

assignments, they learn the value of the peer and teacher feedback cycles through repeated engagements with oral and written feedback. In the end, students produce approximately 15–20 pages of polished writing for the major writing assignments and complete around 10 shorter assignments.

The AL course employs primarily two types of writing assignments, shorter tasks and major assignments. The goal of the shorter writing assignments is to promote students' engagement with the readings, while simultaneously serving as writing practice and as fodder for in-class group discussions which lasted 10–15 minutes. For shorter assignments, students wrote brief comments about the content of the essay and made some marginal comments about the logic and flow of ideas. For major assignments, students received peer feedback in self-selected pairs using structured feedback forms (see Appendix B) that have been designed for each major writing task. Feedback forms have also been specifically designed to foster critical reading skills through which students can check their understanding of the assignment and develop their writing skills by providing targeted feedback to their peers (Rollinson 24). In class, students use 10–15 minutes to provide their written feedback. After this, students return the essay (usually with annotations) along with their feedback form to the author. Students then read and discuss each other's feedback which takes 5–10 minutes. The length of peer-feedback sessions depended on the assignment and the state of the drafts, but in principle, feedback sessions lasted 15–25 minutes. Students are required to submit hardcopies of their revised drafts (i.e., final drafts), along with their peer's feedback forms, to demonstrate what aspects of their peers' feedback they chose to incorporate and to verify that peers were not copy-editing papers.

The writing-as-a-process approach to teaching writing recognizes feedback as an integral component of its practice (Keh 294). Whether oral or written (Rollinson 27), synchronous or asynchronous (Chen 382–85), providing and receiving feedback are important to the development of writing skills (Chen 370). As such, we needed to configure our courses such that feedback continued to be an essential part of our courses.

### Adapting Peer Feedback to the Online Contexts

Before we describe our decisions, it is important for us to explain our added responsibilities as leaders at our respective institutions at the beginning of the pandemic.

For Dennis, very few faculty members in the FLA and across the greater Sophia University community had any experience teaching or learning in online or virtual environments, which reflected the situation of universities around the world (Online Learning Consortium). Thus, with 10 years of teaching experience in virtual and hybrid learning environments, Dennis' input was in high demand

and his responsibilities quickly spread across his faculty and university. He was asked to join a newly created university taskforce for online courses that was responsible for generating and disseminating information to support instructors university-wide. Within the FLA, he collaborated with a few tech-savvy colleagues to support faculty members' needs and to address their concerns about the shift to remote teaching. He also co-created with the co-director of the FLA Writing Center an online writing center to fill the role of the face-to-face tutorials (Harwood and Koyama 165).

Ghada was overseeing the Colby Writing Program, and as such, needed to provide faculty development opportunities related to writing pedagogy across the College. In retrospect, her limited experience with online teaching was a positive thing; it helped her keep an open mind about what might be available and beneficial for her own teaching as well as the teaching of other faculty on campus. A major source of support to help her provide such professional development was a two-page document detailing online best practices that Dennis wrote and shared with her. The document covered numerous topics, such as suggestions for redesigning assignments for the virtual contexts, points to consider for assessment and feedback, and the importance of transparency in communication. This information helped Ghada think about how the suggestions might work within her own context. Through Ghada and Dennis' subsequent conversations about context specific needs, Ghada adapted and distributed revised guidelines during the professional development sessions she offered to the Colby faculty. This document, along with the conversations it sparked with Dennis and other colleagues at Colby, was instrumental to the way Ghada approached the adaptation of her class to remote instruction.

Our added responsibilities, while taxing and tiring at the time, helped us deepen our discussions and facilitated more interactions between us and our colleagues as we needed to consider an array of viewpoints and questions fielded in our respective contexts. For example, Dennis asked Ghada about what her writing center was planning to do about providing writing support to students. By considering information from Ghada's context, Dennis was able to interact with the co-director of the FLA Writing Center in a more informed manner about possible approaches to shifting a physical writing center to a virtual environment.

## MOVING THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM ONLINE

In this section, we discuss our decisions and our rationales for keeping and adapting peer feedback to the online environment in our respective courses. In doing so, we also touch on other adjustments we made to our courses that were not directly related to peer feedback but were part of our overall adaptation of our

courses (e.g., virtual office hours). We include these to show that the adjustments we made to peer feedback did not happen in a vacuum.

### Ghada's Course

Colby's decision to extend spring recess provided time to engage in conversations about online pedagogy with Dennis and other colleagues at Colby. These fruitful exchanges led Ghada to decide to deliver the remainder of the course content asynchronously using the course's Moodle page, which she was already using prior to the pandemic. Three major factors contributed to this decision. First, in the final face-to-face meeting with her class, Ghada adapted and distributed a technology survey from a Colby colleague. The survey results indicated that limited Internet bandwidths and issues with time zones were hurdles for synchronous instruction. Second, Dennis' best practices document emphasized that online learning and teaching should be simple, systematic, and transparent for teachers and learners. With this in mind, Ghada decided that an asynchronous mode of delivery using the course's Moodle page would provide students with a known platform for participating for the rest of the semester. For example, weekly virtual office hours on Zoom were disseminated by class-wide communication through Moodle Announcement, which was also used to send weekly to-do lists. To aid with transparency, she communicated the adjustments to the syllabus to the students in a document and a screencast that she also posted on the course's Moodle page. Finally, to reduce the time zone pressures students faced (as they were asked to leave their dormitories on campus) related to the stress of completing coursework synchronously, an asynchronous mode was chosen to provide students flexibility. For example, students were given forty-eight hours to respond to discussions on a Moodle Forum, as opposed to having to wake up in the middle of the night to participate in a synchronous, virtual class meeting.

Since the students had participated in two in-person feedback sessions with their pre-assigned groups, Ghada decided to keep these groups intact. This decision was made for two reasons. First, students in each group had started to develop a sense of comfort and community with each other, which is vital for the success of a feedback session (Chen 385; Rollinson 26). Second, given that all students were required to leave campus housing and classes were not going to occur as they had, keeping some continuity to the class was one way to support students during a time of uncertainty. To reward students for their added efforts, she increased the participation grade for the peer-feedback sessions from 10 % of the paper's final grade to 15 %.

To set up the virtual sessions and make them more productive and organized, she created four folders on Google Drive, a parent folder for each pre-existing peer-feedback group (e.g., group 1, group 2). Each parent folder contained

subfolders for assignments (e.g., annotated bibliography). Each assignment folder contained a designated folder for each group member. Each group's parent folder was only accessible to the members of that group (i.e., group 1 members could only access "group 1" folder). See Figure 12.1 below for a visual of Ghada's virtual peer-feedback folder system.

Once the folders were created, students were asked to: (1) watch a short video to familiarize them with the comment function on Google Docs; (2) upload an editable draft to their individual student folder along with the feedback form that was available on Moodle; and (3) make three copies of their drafts within their designated folder, using a file naming system to indicate who the author and reviewers were. For example, if Ghada was in a group with Dennis and she uploaded her draft to her individual folder, she would use the file name, "Ghada\_Dennis\_assignment\_name." This system allowed authors to receive feedback from each group member. This system also prevented the potential influence of another member's feedback, and it reflected the individual feedback students provided on essays during the face-to-face peer-review session before the pandemic. Systematically, students uploaded their drafts to the group's virtual peer-feedback folder on a Sunday, in preparation for virtual peer feedback to begin on Monday. Once students uploaded their drafts to their individual folders, they had twenty-four hours to provide their group members with feedback. The class used the feedback forms from the in-class sessions; however, some changes were needed to make them usable virtually. For example, instances where students were asked to circle a thesis statement were changed to "highlight" function, but no content-related adjustments were made. After students provided feedback to their group

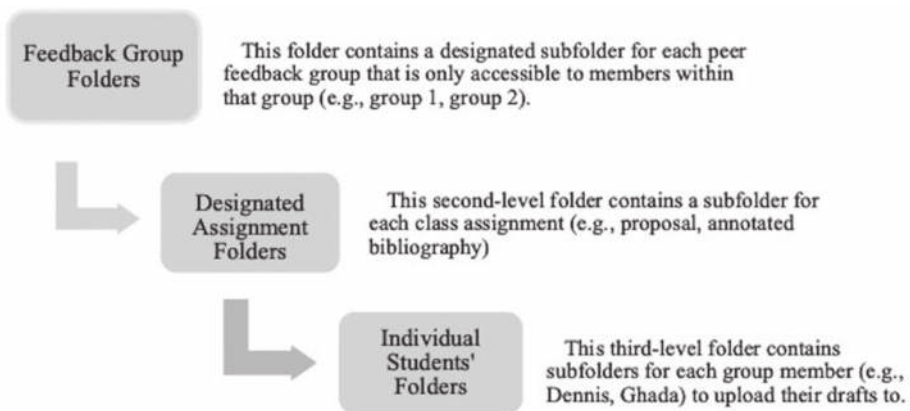


Figure 12.1: Ghada's Virtual Peer-Feedback Folder System

Source: Author

members, a Writers' Center tutor, who was assigned to the class, reviewed the feedback and provided her own feedback to each student in the class.

Given that students had done in-person feedback sessions prior to the shift to remote instruction, none of the students faced any issues adapting in-person feedback procedures to the online environment. One thing that Ghada thinks might have contributed to the success of the virtual sessions is the fact that these sessions were highly structured and required a great deal of pre-session set up. Additionally, the detailed instructions she shared with the students allowed for a much-needed transparency for an asynchronous class.

Some of the benefits of conducting feedback virtually was that it increased the duration of feedback sessions from seventy-five minutes to twenty-four hours, allowing students more time to read their peers' papers and provide feedback. Additionally, the Writers' Center tutor, who only gave oral feedback and advice in face-to-face feedback sessions, provided each student with individualized, written feedback online.

### Dennis' Course

In Dennis' face-to-face class, peer feedback for major writing assignments was highly structured, and peer feedback on shorter writing assignments was mostly for sharing and exploring ideas through small-group discussions. As such, for major writing assignments Dennis decided to use digital versions of the feedback forms that students could complete while their partner screenshared their papers in Zoom's breakout rooms. For shorter writing tasks, Dennis decided to shift them to Moodle Forums. The reasons why are discussed below, but before moving on to that an important point needs attention. The rhetoric and composition program does not hold the view that copy-editing and overtly reformulating sections of texts by peers is meaningfully appropriate to support overall writing development. Thus, for online peer-feedback sessions it was paramount to design the feedback process in ways that prevented the direct editing of a peer's essay. This would allow authors to retain ownership of their work, and it helped prevent students from developing a view of peer feedback as a time for copyediting.

Dennis decided to use asynchronous feedback for shorter writing assignments (i.e., learning journals and reaction papers) by using Moodle Forums. This change was made in part because of Ghada's description of her students' successes employing asynchronous feedback, but also because of her comments from students who noted the extra time to read texts and plan their feedback was helpful and made the process less stressful. Dennis created two dedicated Moodle Forums, one for the learning journals and another for reaction papers. Each student opened a new discussion thread in either the learning journals or reaction paper Forum and posted their work. Assignments were shortened to 300–500

words (from 500–700), and students were asked to respond to a minimum of three classmates' posts with a 50 to 75-word response. For reaction papers the feedback focused on content about the quality of understanding of the reading and the logic used for such justifications. For learning journals, the peer feedback was connected to building community in terms of being a student in the FLA. Moodle Forums became a place for the whole class to communicate and participate asynchronously. What transpired exceeded Dennis' expectations. For nearly every asynchronous feedback session, students engaged more than three peers, and responses often received replies, and many threads remained active after the assignment deadline. Furthermore, since posts were not deleted and the Forums remained open all semester, students often quoted other students' posts and referenced other threads with a given Forum. The interactions were meaningful and dynamic.

For major writing assignments, Dennis decided to use synchronous peer-feedback sessions with structured peer-feedback forms and dialogic interactions that offered opportunities to expand and clarify comments from peers. He also decided to use breakout rooms in Zoom during class time and determined that students could "return" peer-feedback forms to their partner through the chat function.

The feedback forms essentially stayed the same, but a discussion with Ghada about the changes she made to her forms caused Dennis to make minor wording changes to terms. For example, Dennis changed the word "circle" (referring to how to respond to issues within another student's paper) to "type" as students could not edit a screenshare. A reason for not using asynchronous feedback was since students had not physically met one another, he thought students would benefit from the social presence afforded by seeing each other to discuss their feedback in pairs (Harwood and Koyama 170–71). At the time, participants could not select their own breakout rooms, so the random assignment function was used to increase the chances of working with a different partner across feedback sessions.

As one might expect, the first feedback session for a major writing assignment did not go smoothly. Students struggled with typing their feedback comments while reading their peers' essays via screenshare. Since only one screenshare could occur at once, the feedback session took an hour of class time, which is more than double the expected time. Other students couldn't download the peer-feedback forms from the chat function because of device limitations. As a result of these challenges, Dennis created a document explaining how to create a non-editable link on the university's cloud storage so students could share links to their drafts. This allowed feedback pairs to independently read each other's drafts while completing the feedback forms. For students working with peers who had issues downloading documents from the chat function because of device restrictions,



they were asked to share their feedback forms through email attachment. The following feedback sessions went very well. Students successfully created their links, and peer review took 30 minutes to complete. Compared to the first session, the subsequent feedback forms submitted by students showed a more focused engagement with their peers' essays. Students wrote detailed comments and suggestions and asked specific questions.

After hearing how Ghada used videos to help her students navigate the comments function in Google docs, Dennis decided to create screencasts that featured issues such as how to contribute to Moodle Forum topics, where to find peer-feedback forms, and how to use the messages function to chat with classmates. Although he had used screencasts in his previous online teaching experiences, those screencasts were recorded to explain assignment sheets and rubrics (which was also done for the shift to remote teaching), they were not used to explain how to use the class's LMS, for example. Indeed, the pandemic made him reflect on his past online teaching experiences and interact with Ghada's frontline stories in ways that made him find and apply new teaching strategies to the online environment.

## RETHINKING OUR TEACHING PRACTICES AFTER THE PANDEMIC

Despite the stark differences in the location of our institutions, our students' backgrounds, our program goals, the content of our courses, and our status in relation to the start of the semester, we have no doubt that our respective situations and increased responsibilities enriched our interactions and made us more intentional (Bransford 197) about the adaptations we were willing to make to our own classes (Farrell and Kennedy 2), as we considered multiple perspectives (Howard and Johnson 410–412) in our collaborations to make sense of the confusion leading up to the shift to remote teaching (Clarà 263).

As part of the end-of-semester, written reflections, Ghada added a question that asked students about their perception of the effectiveness of virtual peer feedback. The students provided a range of praise for their peers and for the process (e.g., more time to comment on their peers' drafts, not having to remember their peers' oral feedback), which helped solidify certain elements of the peer-feedback process for the next semester. While students noted areas for improvement (e.g., asynchronous lacks an oral discussion component), they noted that such complications were unavoidable given the circumstances.

The decision for using both modes of feedback in Dennis' classes was well received by students. In their student learning journals, many students wrote

comments about what they learned from their peers in the feedback sessions (e.g., freewriting in later stages of writing, using alternative search platforms to the library's) and about the skills they learned from being online (e.g., learning how to make shareable links). Students provided a wide range of praise for the peer-feedback sessions, and many noted that providing feedback to their peers helped improve their own writing more than the feedback they received. In fact, every student stated that they had arranged at least one peer-review session with a classmate outside of class time. With our students' feedback in mind, below are some aspects of the changes and adaptations we made for the shift that we plan to integrate into our future classes.

- Incorporating asynchronous, virtual peer feedback as out-of-class tasks, and using in-class discussions between students to clarify their written asynchronous feedback. This approach to peer feedback might be one way for instructors, who do not have dedicated class time to perform peer feedback sessions in class, to integrate peer feedback into their teaching practices.
- Encouraging students to seek feedback from their peers outside of class time, in addition to in-class feedback and teacher feedback.
- Designing versatile peer feedback forms for either in-person or virtual peer-feedback sessions.
- Incorporating asynchronous community-building activities early in the semester. This could be achieved by asking students to post a short self-introduction narrative (e.g., literacy narrative, linguistic history), which will allow all students to see each other's posts and not limit students to only reading and discussing their group members' narratives.
- Requiring students to email discussion questions about the assigned readings twenty-four hours before discussion-based class meetings. This can increase students' involvement in their own learning and will give shy students a way to participate in class discussions. (Tip: Keep a record of whose questions you use so each student has a chance for their question to contribute to class discussions.)
- Sending weekly to-do lists about what will be covered or what will be due the following week helped (the teacher and) students to be able to plan.
- Using screencasts to explain assignment expectations and procedures, and any new technology required for participating in class activities. In addition to freeing up class time, this will aid with the course's transparency, as students can revisit these as needed.

## FINAL REFLECTIONS ON OUR COLLABORATIONS

Reflecting on our iterative collaborations, we think one important point is that our conversations centered on gathering information from each other, so we could individually reflect on our own situations. We did not approach our interactions with the aim of implementing identical peer-feedback processes, though that would have been acceptable. Across our interactions, we used various modes of collaboration to accomplish our goals. For example, while time zones presented us with challenges for video calls (Ghada's evening was Dennis' morning), the time difference made collaborating on documents offline very efficient. When Ghada would work on a document (e.g., rating rubric for discussion board posts) and send it to Dennis by email, Dennis could provide his feedback by the end of his workday. This created a virtual twenty-four hour work window on documents, as Ghada would wake up to feedback to consider and incorporate. With the time difference in mind, video calls were difficult to schedule and were reserved for time-sensitive feedback where Ghada and Dennis needed to discuss an issue or to collaboratively generate a resource. In these instances, video calls facilitated document sharing and editing while also allowing for time to explain and discuss the changes and ideas we were considering. This was particularly important for Ghada's contexts as she was in the midst of teaching and needed some documents created immediately.

Overall, the shift to remote teaching made us more intentional in our teaching practices whereas we might have taught a lesson with our previous teaching experiences mechanically moving us through the motions. In making the move to the online contexts, we had to view everything from the students' perspectives. We needed to consider if our pre-pandemic materials would make sense to students without any additional support from peers or us. As we noted above, we created screencasts to support students' understandings of assignment and overall course expectations via an explanation of the (adjusted) syllabus. When we return to face-to-face teaching this is also a resource we plan to keep. Logically it makes sense that students in normal times would potentially need to revisit the assignment directions, and it would be beneficial if they could do so with our explanations embedded for them to consider. Our understanding of the value of providing multiple lines of communication with and among students was sharpened through this experience. In addition to offering more ways for students to communicate with us (e.g., virtual office hours, emailing), we also created ways for students to interact with one another (e.g., Moodle Forums dedicated to technology questions, Messenger). We were also intentional in teaching students when and how to use such forms of communication. For example, asking classmates in the middle of the night a question on Moodle Forums about issues with generating links to share with classmates will likely receive immediate responses

from classmates, whereas an email to the professor about the same issue will have been responded to sometime the next day.

Although the shift to remote teaching was stressful and challenged us in unique ways, we knew, as we have felt in our many previous collaborations, that we could count on honest and critically constructive feedback and input from one another. In short, we knew that we would not be going through this situation alone. In fact, the co-writing of this chapter is a collaborative reflection of our experiences that brings us closure to a time of great change for many people around the world. We hope our story will become a resource for others and that it will encourage others to engage in collaborative reflective processes with their colleagues.

## **APPENDIX 12.1: GHADA'S PEER-FEEDBACK FORM FOR ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

### Instructions

Using this form, you will evaluate your peer's first draft.

### Content

After reading your peer's draft at least once, answer the questions below (don't write more than a few sentences). In addition to filling out this form, be sure to add marginal comments directly into the draft.

- How did they introduce their topic? More specifically, which introduction “move” did they use in their introduction (i.e., did they start with a quotation, historical background, narrative, etc.)?
- What is their research question(s)?
- Are their summaries concise? Do they tell you what you need to know about the source? If not, how can they make their summaries better?
- Are their reflections comprehensive? Elaborate.
- Is their conclusion fully developed, where they discuss how all their sources fit together or does it need work? If you think it needs work, help them out by providing a few suggestions below.

## Organization

Please make sure that your peer included all the components of the annotated bibliography that we discussed in class.

- Introduction
- Source information in APA style
- Article summaries
- Reflections
- Conclusion

## Vocabulary

Please **bold** the vocabulary words you are *NOT* sure that your peer used correctly.

## Grammar

Please *highlight* (in gray) *no more than 3* sentences (but at least 1 sentence) that you think are *NOT* grammatically correct, or that you think could use revision because there is “something strange about the way it sounds.”

## APA Formatting Guidelines

Did your peer miss something? NO or, if YES, what was it?

## Following Formatting Guidelines

Did your peer follow the formatting guidelines? NO or, if YES, what was it?

## General Comments

## **APPENDIX 12.2: DENNIS’ ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY PEER- FEEDBACK FORM**

### 1. Sources and References

Table 12.1: Peer Grading Rubric

Total points: ____/10				
	0	1	2	3
Format	Did not provide a bibliographic citation	Incorrect APA referencing	Correct APA referencing	
Content	Misunderstood the task statement	Lacks necessary details	Useful details are provided, although some may be missing	Appropriately addresses the task and includes all necessary details
Organization	Illogical and/or too difficult to follow	Some issues with coherence that make it difficult to follow at times	Clear, but too many ideas for an annotated bibliography	Successfully presents details to fit into an 100-150-word annotation
Language use	Many careless mistakes; extensive proofreading was needed.	Some careless mistakes; more proofreading was needed.	Clear, without too many distracting errors	

- What type of sources did the author use? (e.g., research article, chapter in an edited book, etc.).
  - Are the references formatted correctly? If not, describe the problem (e.g., check the format for titles), but *do not* correct it. Just make a note to the author (use the handbook as your guide).
2. Do the annotations explain the main purpose of the sources? If yes, please type the sentence/section that explains the main purpose and label with #2. Provide comments below.
  3. Do the annotations include a summary of the sources? If yes, type the summary sentence/section and label with a #3. Provide comments below.
  4. Does the author indicate the possible audience for the sources? If yes, type this sentence/section and label with a #4. Provide comments below.
  5. Does the author evaluate the relevance of the information? If yes, type this sentence/section and label with a #5. Provide comments below.

6. Does the author note any special features? If yes, type this sentence/section and label with a #6. Provide comments below.
7. Does the author warn readers of any defect, weakness, or bias? If yes, type this sentence/section and label with a #7. Provide comments below.
8. Are the annotations written in an objective manner (i.e., no first-person pronoun “I”; no comments about personal interest or relevance)? If not, type the part that needs to be revised. Provide comments if any.
9. Are the annotations written in a unified and coherent manner—i.e., are the sentences related and do they cohere (theme & rheme)? If not, provide comments on how they can be improved.
10. Provide overall feedback for the annotations.
11. Provide a tentative grade for the writer by checking the rubric below:

## NOTES

- 1 At a US university, this would be the equivalent to a College of Liberal Arts.
- 2 This is the equivalent to a Department Chair at a US institution.

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# Rhetoric, Empathy, and Service: Cultivating a Craft of Access in (and Beyond) Course Design

BRIAN LE LAY

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It sounds trite, but it's true: We are all designers. When we use digital technologies to create a syllabus, send a course announcement, provide feedback on student writing, or meet with students, we do more than design scattered texts and communications. We design an *experience* (a course). We are digital *user experience* designers. We aim to make the digital course experience persuasive—engaging, meaningful, and inclusive—for our users (students). That's tricky because (yet another truism says) everyone's different. With space, time, and so much machinery flung between us and the diversity of people we design for, how can we design engaging, meaningful, and inclusive courses?

One approach says: *Design for the average person (maybe that's yourself). Wait for evidence (such as an accommodation letter) before changing it up.*

Another approach says: *Be proactive. Adopt best practices to make your courses persuasive from the start.*

A third approach says: *Bodies and minds are dynamic. Adopt practices that help you to understand people, to empathize, to be responsive.* That's the idea behind human-centered design. It's what I advocate.

The goal of this chapter is to offer a mindset—a way of thinking about course design, disability, and access. I began thinking about access just as the coronavirus pandemic drove us all online. Several months earlier, in my first semester as a PhD student in rhetoric and technical communication, I began reading about disability in a rhetoric of health and medicine seminar. I realized then that I was,

and am, disabled. For all of my life before then, I had it in my head that disability looked a certain way, and because I didn't match that image, I wasn't disabled. Then my thinking shifted. The following semester as we moved online, as conversations about inclusive digital design became more frequent and prominent, I rounded out my readings in disability theory with readings about accessibility. I noticed that accessibility resources often present general practices (e.g., using alternative text for images, captioning video content). While these practices facilitate access for many people, they alone don't address disabilities like mine—rare, dynamic, and unpredictable. Shortly after, I became a research assistant consulting with university faculty as they worked to develop their course sites in preparation for a fully online fall semester. I learned that while many instructors find online course design to be difficult, they often find *inclusive* online course design downright bewildering. Then I developed a core component of this chapter's argument: Making things accessible is often so difficult because we rely on practices that don't get the job done. If disabilities are dynamic, then we need a dynamic way of thinking about and designing for disabled people.<sup>1</sup>

I approach this discussion from a social justice technical communication perspective—that is, the nexus of design, technology, and rhetoric, driven by an ethic of advocacy for the best interests of users, and informed by disability justice scholarship and activism. A core insight of disability justice is that disability is dynamic and intersectional. First, I discuss recent access research in writing studies and make the case that this scholarship asks us to adopt a *craft mindset*—to cultivate what I'm calling a craft of access. I then discuss disability accommodations and design checklists—why these are insufficient to make a craft of access and how, unaccompanied by a broader set of design practices, they can be harmful to students. I then detail a craft mindset that reorients our rhetorical approach to course design around feminist reimaginations of empathy and rhetoric. I then position a craft of access as a kind of service in two senses: service as distinct (but inseparable from) teaching and research, and *to serve*, as in an ethic of care, a drive to advocate. I close with practices to help writing studies teacher-researchers cultivate a craft of access.

## ACCESS IN WRITING STUDIES

In recent years, writing studies teacher-researchers have increasingly centered disability and access. This scholarship has addressed a range of contexts, topics, and spaces: curriculum design (Garrett), collaborative writing pedagogy, assignment pacing and scaffolding (Wood), course policies and content design (Womack), rhetorical theory (Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric*; Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*), writing centers (Babcock; Brizee et al.; Stark & Wilson), program administration

(Vidali; Yergeau, “Creating a Culture of Access”), conference spaces (Cecil-Lemkin; Hubrig et al.; Price, “Access Imagined”), faculty accommodation (Kerschbaum), and technical and professional communication (Browning and Cagle; Meloncon; Zdenek). The shared objective of this diverse scholarship is to advance writing studies and the academy writ large beyond perfunctory, legalistic approaches that treat access as a “checklist, add-on, afterthought, or mere legal obligation” (Zdenek 4). That means prioritizing access at the beginning of any project, and decentering the abstract, normatively abled body and mind as the default intended user (instructor, student, and so on).

Some scholars explicitly challenge the idea that *ability* and *disability* are discrete, stable categories. In “Creating a Culture of Access in Composition Studies,” Brewer et al. distinguish between *consumptive access*—reducing common barriers to spaces, texts, and experiences (the second approach noted at the outset), and *transformative access*—dismantling the assumptions, structures, and practices that discriminately foreclose or facilitate access (the third approach). Access is not merely a courtesy extended to people marked as disabled, nor is it only about including disabled people; it’s about rethinking how the conceptions of ability and disability which we enact through our design practices actually make the world accessible for some and inaccessible for others, and how these practices systematically define and reproduce categories like *ability* and *disability*. Transformative access is about how we might remake the world.

## A Craft of Access

I tend to read access research in writing studies as a collective effort to cultivate a disciplinary craft of access, to shift our discipline’s “specific arrangements of knowing and making,” or what disability justice scholar Aimi Hamraie calls *access-knowledge* (5; also see Johnson on disciplinary craft knowledge). If writing is a craft (and I believe it is), then our access research has sought to advance it, to make access core to writing and the teaching of writing, to cultivate a craft of access. Design scholars Nelson and Stolterman define craft as “the skill set a designer needs to use when working with the right materials, in the right proportion, with the right tool set in order to *produce* a final desired, designed outcome” (73; emphasis in original). Craft entails an ongoing calibration between the designer, their tools, and the designed-for—a relationship of care mediated by desire, the designer’s judgment (“right”), and a kind of attentiveness. What if we were to approach access just as we teach writing? Like making texts (accessible), making our online courses accessible—and making the *access-knowledge* needed to do so—is a recursive process, a craft. A course ends, but craft continues, if we make it so.

The notion of access as craft extends Huntsman et al.'s discussion of moral habits conducive to enacting access and Annika Konrad's suggestion that we develop "habits for access in everyday life" (196). Nelson and Stolterman's definition of craft is rich with implied habits: craft is a skillset continually shaped by habit-making practices which retool our technical skills, hone our capacity for situated judgment, and train our attentiveness to the details of people and things and their relations. My argument is that we already always cultivate a craft of access. We are always making experiences accessible or inaccessible—but for whom? The challenge is to weave these skills together in ways that facilitate access for people excluded by prevailing practices. A craft framing—understanding access as a relationship of care—enables us to think with more nuance about how we might make our designed experiences more inclusive.

In the following sections, I craft an account of this relationship. First, we need to talk about tools.

## ACCOMMODATIONS AND CHECKLISTS

Are accessible design checklists and disability accommodations the right tools for the job? Lots of people think so.

But consider the student who requests additional time to complete assignments and exams. The student provides a letter signed by a university resource officer. The instructor decides whether and if so, how, to redesign the assessment process to accommodate this particular student. The result is what Dolmage refers to as the *retrofit* (*Academic Ableism* 70). Accommodation-as-retrofit entails the modification or alteration of existing spaces or practices in lieu of large-scale restructuring; it privileges the normatively abled body and mind as the ideal or expected user and renders the nonnormative as the outlier, the special case, the other. The requesting student faces several potential dangers in the process of disclosure.

Self-disclosure potentially puts the student at risk for the discrediting that can occur as a consequence. According to Dolmage, they may be accused of "faking it, jumping a queue, or asking for an advantage" (*Academic Ableism* 10). For all the assumed privileges, accommodation is a laborious ongoing process. Konrad has engaged this process as a *rhetorical labor of disability*, a complex performance of a socially acceptable disabled self where the disabled person must continually explain their access needs to others, calculating the potential costs and benefits of each exchange, even teaching others about accessibility. The result? Our example student suffers *access fatigue*—itself a foreclosure of access—and then they don't speak up. Silenced, they still can't count on an already accessible experience, because accommodation is case-by-case. That's how the retrofit works (or doesn't).

Consider another student. Let's call him "Brian." Brian has ocular albinism, a congenital visual impairment characterized by reduced depth perception and visual acuity (sharpness of vision), strabismus (pejoratively called "crossed eyes"), photophobia (light sensitivity), and nystagmus (rhythmic, uncontrolled eye movement). He doesn't perceive the world as in an earthquake, although it does often undulate in and out of focus. Being in brightly lit spaces for a long time gives him tension headaches. He can't read faces from more than a few feet away, so he often gets confused and quiet in large group discussions. But for many years, he didn't think of himself as disabled. He couldn't make sense of his experience and didn't develop a language to articulate it. As Margaret Price points out, "Many forms of disablement are difficult to name, notice, or predict," such as "chronic fatigue, chemical sensitivity, various cognitive impairments, or health disparities linked to environment, race, and class" ("The Precarity of Disability" 192). The difficulty is compounded by our unexamined assumptions about ability and disability as stable, predictable phenomena that present themselves to us in particular, predictable ways. Disability justice scholar-activists have argued (and I agree) that *ability* and *disability* are indistinct, unstable, and intersectional (Clare; Garland-Thomson; Kafer; McRuer; Puar; Schalk). Accommodation-as-retrofit assumes otherwise. The student is expected to name and predict, to be proactive. The institution reacts.

Though, that isn't always the case. For example, the University of Minnesota's *Accessible U* resource for faculty and administrators advocates a proactive approach to access, inviting readers to "Start with the 7 core skills" for presenting images, colors, headings, hyperlinks, lists, tables, and audio/video content. The core skills might initiate a habit of *knowing* and *making* access before we advance to the harder stuff. The problem is that we often don't. Rather than cultivating a craft of access specific to the writing course and to our particular students, we often grant superordinate authority to well-known checklists like the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, the Quality Matters Rubric, and Universal Design for Learning (Oswal and Meloncon). We might turn, now and then, to our learning management systems, which offer accessibility checker tools—a checklist in the form of an algorithm. While checklists might lead us to tackle common access barriers before they materialize, we risk running into some of the problems posed by accommodation: the assumption that disability is stable, nameable, and predictable, and the accordant disregard for dynamically disabled people—that is, if we rely on checklists and accommodations to address disability. The solution, I believe, is not to toss these practices out the window. They facilitate access for many people. The solution is to fold the existing practices into an active, engaged commitment, a craft.

## REPOSITIONING THE RHETOR-DESIGNER

If we understand ability and disability as unstable concepts and dynamic phenomena, and we commit to making a craft of access, then how do we make informed, responsible course design decisions? Many scholars and activists have argued for participatory design (PD): rather than just engaging in detached or data-driven speculation about people's needs and preferences, designers should directly involve marginalized and most-impacted communities as active participants in the design process (Oswal and Meloncon; Salvo; Spinuzzi). But participatory design demands something of us, more than seeking input or sharing decision-making power. As design critic Sasha Costanza-Chock has pointed out, PD processes are shaped by power dynamics between designers (teachers) and participants (students), as well as among participants themselves. Participants, we must remember, cannot always articulate or predict their needs—and may be fatigued from the rhetorical labor of doing so.

In short, any course design strategy and any activity where we cultivate access-knowledge call for close attention to rhetoric. Rhetoric will drive our efforts to craft access in specific instances and to cultivate a craft of access more generally. That's why we need a rhetorical approach fit for the dynamism of ability and disability.

### Putting Ourselves in Others' Shoes or Being-with-Others?

How we design for students is determined by how we position ourselves as rhetor-designers relative to them—our posture, the pose we adopt in relation to the designed-for and the set practices we use to cross the divide between bodies and minds. Rhetoricians call it *audience analysis*. Designers call it *empathizing*.

Empathic practices are central to human-centered design processes. The Stanford d.school's famous five-stage design framework begins with "Empathize," which indicates a variety of practices intended to help designers determine people's needs (Dam and Siang). For example, the user persona—a personified model synthesized from qualitative data—is intended to represent a type of user relevant to the design. The result is a useful fiction: a named "archetype" complete with a biography and characteristic behaviors, preferences, and motivations (Cooper et al. 68). In rhetorical terms, personas function as inventional heuristics fashioned to "promote design with distinct, complex individuals in mind" (Bakke 320). And not just ourselves (the most distinct, complex of all individuals). Personas help us to avoid what Cooper et al. call *self-referential design*, where we "project [our] own goals, motivations, skills, and mental models onto a product's design" (65). We could proceed to plug our personas (we might make multiple)

into an empathy map, a journey map, an experience map, or one of the many other empathic practices designers use to better understand how intended users might navigate a design (Gibbons). Empathy—or what Kuang and Fabricant call *industrialized empathy*—came to be the *sine qua non* of good design during the 20th century as product designers shifted from a *designer-centered model* (people don't know what they want or need until a genius gives it to them) to a *user-centered model* (designers don't know what people want or need until they find out). Finding out isn't just a matter of gathering relevant information about people; designers typically theorize empathy as a kind of immersion. We put ourselves in others' shoes to make designs persuasive.

Rhetorical design approaches oriented toward immersion and persuasion have been roundly criticized by rhetoricians and designers. In human-computer interactions, Bennett and Rosner have argued that empathic practices like those discussed above can decenter disabled people's lived experience: "Empathy becomes a mechanism through which designers demonstrate their professional judgment by responding to their personal reactions and subverting the experiences they intended to uplift" (7). Disabled people become displaced from the process and replaced by the designer's own process of invention. While personas and other empathic practices are purported to prevent self-referential design from driving the process, such practices can serve to reinscribe our assumptions. For example, the disability simulation is an empathic practice often critiqued by disability scholars. We might imagine, for example, that by wearing a blindfold while using screen-reader software to navigate our course website, we have really captured the essence of being blind or visually impaired, but maybe we have just superimposed our own impressions onto the experience. We certainly have not accessed the tacit knowledge disabled people bring to the use of assistive technologies. This is an insidious turn of events—a situation we may fail to notice, feeling that far from displacing disabled people, we have actually developed a deep, rich, meaningful understanding of them! In this situation, who's being persuaded of (or to do) what?

As rhetorical scholar Lisa Blankenship writes: "If changing others is the goal, a more sustainable approach may be first to change ourselves" (15). We can do so by consciously practicing *rhetorical empathy*: a *stance* of openness and receptivity that prioritizes "learning and adjusting" and a *strategy*, the accordant communicative practices (16). Blankenship forwards four central characteristics of rhetorical empathy: "Yielding to an Other by sharing and listening to personal stories"; "Considering motives behind speech acts and actions"; "Engaging in reflection and self-critique"; and "Addressing difference, power, and embodiment" (20). The goal of rhetorical empathy is to move beyond a transactional, goal-directed praxis where we seek to persuade or have particular effects on others, and toward a praxis fit for "connecting across difference" (4). Rhetorical empathy is "a different way of

being-with-others” (18). Bennett and Rosner arrive at the same place: rather than solely trying to represent others’ subjective experiences (we can’t) in the pursuit of persuasive impact through design, we should pursue “a process of ongoing attunement” to others (10). This is the rhetoric we need.

## RETOOLING CHECKLISTS: TOWARD AN ECOLOGY OF PRACTICES

The inventional shift to attunement, rather than immersion and persuasion, means we are no longer at the center of things, the driving force, the sole designer. The idea of the rhetor-designer as the driving force has been challenged by rhetorical scholars and design scholars alike. Lucy Kimbell has argued for practice theories of design, which emphasize “what people do in their embodied, often mundane, situated interactions with other people and with things” (132). The practice-oriented rhetor-designer is attuned to the “messy, contingent combination of minds, things, bodies, structures, processes, and agencies” (141). Posthumanist and new materialist rhetorical scholars have advanced similar arguments (Boyle; Card et al.; Graham; Gries). These scholars challenge the actuality and utility of clean binaries (e.g., human and nonhuman, nature and culture) and “acknowledge the significant, active role nonhuman things play in collective existence alongside a host of other entities” (Gries 5). This way of thinking about course design is custom-fit to suit our dynamic conceptions of ability and disability. If both are dynamic, rhetor-designers need to be dynamic, too.

That doesn’t mean we must discard our design checklists. It does mean that checklists and specific design practices become less central. These aren’t synonymous with access. They are tools among tools (among things, people, and so on). We need all the tools we can get. To learn how to use the tools we have, to find and fashion new ones, to cultivate good judgment, we must commit to cultivating a craft of access through connection—continual attunement to things and others. Relationships matter.

As technical communicator researchers Rebecca Walton, Kristen Moore, and Natasha Jones argued in their 2019 book *Technical Communication after the Social Justice Turn*, “Empathy only acknowledges others’ suffering or pain. Empathy does nothing to address that suffering or pain. Empathy does not require critical action or movement toward redressing inequities” (165). The authors make a strong case that technical communicators should engage in “coalitional action,” actively working alongside and with others to *recognize, reveal, reject*, and “[replace] unjust and oppressive practices with intersectional, coalition-led practices” (133). To those ends, we now have a re-versioned empathy—an intersectional,



feminist-influenced praxis—that establishes the ethics of engagement as we cultivate our craft with others:

- We don't rely on specific accessibility tools or practices. We do situate them (and ourselves) in broader contexts.
- We don't let our assumptions steer the course design process. We do engage in ongoing, critical reflection.
- We don't try to step inside others' bodies and minds as a means to persuade them. We do seek to be with others.

To be clear, I'm not arguing that we should never persuade. As long as we design courses, we aim to make persuasive learning experiences. I'm arguing that if we want to do so, and if we want those experiences to be broadly accessible, then we need to think and act beyond bounded course design practices and student encounters with course content and learning environments. Unbounded, those rhetorical engagements should shape and come to be shaped by a much wider and more varied ecology of people, things, and practices.

Now we may be wondering how a craft of access fits within the ecology of our existing work. Is it research? Is it teaching? Yes and yes, which is why I believe it's worthwhile to frame a craft of access as a kind of service. In "An Ethic of Service in Composition and Rhetoric," Linda Adler-Kassner and Duane Roen argue that service is more than a well-defined class of professional activities, such as our participation in "departmental, campus, and cross-campus committees." They write:

... we see service as an opportunity to build alliances with others on campus and within the community, thus enlarging our experiences (which contribute to our research and our teaching) and, ultimately, the experiences of our students ... service is a vital activity that runs through all elements of our work, and we strive to achieve a balance that draws on principle and brings together our research, teaching, and service practices.

For Adler-Kassner and Roen, the key principle is an ethic of "advocacy for writers." This ethic also drives our conversations about access in writing studies research and pedagogy, where we are working to make access a core part of everything we do, to reimagine the very concepts of ability, disability, and access.

I now close with (of all things) a checklist—a bricolage of practices intended to help writing studies teacher-scholars cultivate a craft of access in service with and to others. These will not topple the system overnight, but they will get you to the dance.

- *Curate your content.* Social media hashtags like #DisabilityTooWhite and #a11y, and accounts like Disabled Academic Collective (on Twitter), offer access to people, personal narratives, conversations, and resources about

disability and accessibility. We often hear about the adverse psychological, social, and political effects of social media use. Let's also keep in mind that social media gives voice to marginalized people. When we consciously curate our content streams to incorporate those voices, we create a social media environment for ourselves that enables us to develop greater awareness.

- *Read a range of texts and genres.* The disability justice scholars and activists discussed in this chapter offer theoretical and practical resources to spur thinking, writing, and designing. You should check out the *Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard J. Davis, which features research and memoir from a range of scholar-activists. In my own development as a disabled teacher-researcher, I have found personal narratives to be especially informative, particularly the memoirs of visually impaired poet-professor Stephen Kuusisto (*Planet of the Blind*; *Have Dog, Will Travel*; and *Eavesdropping: A Memoir of Blindness and Listening*). The blog “The Outlook From Here” (co-operated by rhetorical scholar Annika Konrad) presents personal narratives by Wisconsin residents living with blindness or visual impairment.
- *Build technical skills.* I'll say it again: Making access happen means more than memorizing and deploying well-defined design practices. Knowing and doing go hand-in-hand, which is why it's important to simultaneously cultivate knowledge (as the above practices do) and technical skills. Developing technical skills might mean learning about the functionalities and limitations of your institution's learning management system and the implications for course design. Universities sometimes offer web-based accessibility resources for students, faculty, and administrators. It's a good idea to follow accessibility websites like Deque Systems and WebAIM. Coursera offers a free course, “An Introduction to Accessibility and Inclusive Design.” The Critical Design Lab offers podcasts, blogs, workshops, and other excellent resources from a disability justice perspective.
- *Start with the syllabus.* The course syllabus is an agreement you have with your students, but it doesn't have to feel like a contract per se. In “A Syllabus Is Not a Contract,” published by *Inside Higher Ed*, John Warner writes: “Trying to adhere to the syllabus as a contract often required twisting myself into shapes I did not care for.” We sometimes find ourselves following our plans and policies even when these no longer work for us and our students. Anne-Marie Womack's “Accessible Syllabus” web resource offers helpful suggestions for displaying images and text, shaping inclusive rhetoric, and creating accessible policies. Designing an accessible syllabus asks us to cultivate the technical aspects of access while we rethink the

assumptions behind our course policies. It demonstrates our efforts to make the course inclusive and serves as a vital point of access all the way through the term.

- *Seek student feedback.* End-of-term student feedback is sometimes difficult to interpret and translate into course design, such as when students' comments and suggestions conflict. A less apparent difficulty with designing in response to end-of-term feedback is that it comes from people who have already completed the course, not the people who will experience the next iteration. This problem and the challenge of conflicting feedback can be counteracted with routine feedback cycles before and at multiple points during the term. One week before the start of each term, I distribute a "Technology & Online Learning" survey to my students to find out how they feel about the upcoming term and online learning in general (what would be helpful? what should I avoid doing?), their access to technology, their living situation, and anything else they would like me to know. In a recent term (during the coronavirus pandemic), I found out that many of my students were caring for children and other family members. Many were studying off-campus, out-of-state, and outside of the US. One implication I drew from this feedback was to schedule one weekly virtual student drop-in session later in the day when students were available. Subsequent feedback cycles (for example, every few weeks—but find what works for you and your students) can include general questions as well as specific questions asking students to evaluate prior changes or to offer suggestions for how previously conflicting feedback might be resolved.
- *Share and organize.* The key element in a craft of access is to share our work, our challenges, and our knowledge with other engaged professionals. It's this element, most of all, that contributes to the above activities. What Twitter accounts should we follow? What books, journals, and blogs should we read? How do we get a more accurate auto-transcription of the video content we record? How do we know whether an inclusive late-assignment policy is as inclusive as it could be? How do we make sense of student feedback without changing what already works? We talk with others who work to confront similar questions. We already know that teaching others supports our own learning. By talking with others, we develop a language for talking about access. We provide helpful information, resources, advice, and insights that enable others to continue cultivating a craft of access. In turn, others do the same for us. This can take many forms: a department working group devoted to discussing access in online courses, a regular meeting arranged between colleagues, our participation in campus groups and collectives, writing about and sharing our experiences at campus events

and academic conferences. Collectivity sustains our craft. It keeps our practices of knowing and making alive.

- *Repeat.*

## NOTE

- 1 Throughout this chapter and with some hesitation, I use the term “disabled people,” an example of *identity-first language*, in contrast to *person-first language* (e.g., *persons with disabilities*). The important debate over terms of reference in disability communities is beyond the scope of this chapter.

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