

## **Brad Benz – Annual Review for 2020-21 Teaching Reflection**

Teaching through a Mask: Face to Face during the Plague Year

- **Writing Retreat, June 2021 – Shared Insights**

My retreat group discussed at some length our teaching experiences during the plague year, for face to face (f2f) classes, online classes (synchronous and asynchronous), and the at times necessary hyflex approach. We considered some of the surprising advantages of working through Zoom as well as some ongoing challenges that may carry over into future teaching scenarios. For example, we examined some of the benefits of conducting peer review over Zoom, with the professor using the flexibility of a Zoom meeting for a small group of students to discuss their drafts, as opposed to meeting in class to conduct peer review. We wondered why we haven't done that before – for peer review and other activities. We also discussed the level of student engagement in online teaching across the year, with some classes being more engaged and delivering high quality work, while in other classes, not so much. We also discussed our level of comfort teaching on campus, particularly the return to a mostly empty DU campus in Fall 2020. For the face to face (f2f) teaching, we discussed a sense of feeling pressured to teach in person - particularly as teaching faculty off the tenure track - in order to offer in person classroom experiences, particularly for first year students living in the dorms. We also felt semi-obligated to teach f2f in order to help DU as an institution weather the COVID financial storm, even as we experienced seeing our 401k's receiving reduced financial contributions from DU. I certainly spent considerable time in summer 2020 pondering my next move if in fact I lost my job and/or the Writing Program was eliminated – or “discontinued” like the English Language Center. I'm grateful for this job, and I'm glad

DU appears to be coming out of the COVID in what appears to be reasonably okay financial health. Finally, some of us looked forward to returning to f2f teaching in Fall 2020 after the quick pivot to online classes in Spring 2020, but we all share hopes for a more traditional Fall 2021, whatever the new normal may look like.

- **Teaching Analysis**

During the 2020-21 academic year, I taught FSEM, three sections of WRIT 1122, four sections of WRIT 1133 and WRIT 2701: Green Rhetoric during the interterm. I was also tested 21 times for COVID during the academic year, including 13 times in the Fall quarter alone. I had four students in my FSEM contract the coronavirus, and 12 FSEM students were quarantined at least once, with two unfortunate souls quarantined twice in the Fall. Needless to say, I was terrified when I received this email in week 3 of the Fall quarter, but it became less terrifying after the initial one:

*I am writing today to share that earlier this week you may have been in the general vicinity of an individual that has tested positive for the virus. I'm contacting you now because our records indicate you were scheduled for in-person classes in Sturm Hall 453 which is where you may have been in the same room as this individual.*

Of course, as an FSEM professor teaching in Sturm Hall 453, I knew exactly which “individual” had tested positive. For those of us who were on campus in 2020-21, given the concerns and fears that we felt and the legalese emails we received, it's not surprising several students opted for the “I'm going to Zoom in for the rest of the quarter” approach. For one FSEMer, that Zooming in started in week 2 and never stopped. The same thing happened in my WRIT 1122 in the Winter 2021 quarter. Another challenge: for all of the new COVID-ready hyflex

technology that was installed in DU classes – and those were helpful additions – they didn’t totally remedy the challenges of teaching students in class as well as those students at home Zooming. I’ve joked that I’m not a reality TV star, but those reality TV shows have a deep support, like multiple camera operators and a sound person with a microphone, plus professional lighting. I’ve got a MAC and a dongle. And I don’t jump off the screen. I tried to calibrate everyone’s expectations accordingly.

That said, I don’t regret that I made the decision to teach in person because I recognized how important it was for DU to fill the dorms and put “heads in beds” and because as a faculty member off the tenure track, I felt vulnerable as a possibly expendable employee. For someone my age closer to the end of a career than the beginning or even the middle, and as someone with parental responsibilities, the prospect of a new job hunt was particularly terrifying. Teaching in person in my mask while being fearful of catching the coronavirus was not always a pleasant experience. In my f2f classes, I found myself much more stressed out about teaching than in years past, particularly in the Fall 2020 quarter, when we knew less about the virus, when it was spreading throughout the dorms, and - even when being hypervigilant - it was nearly impossible to always remain six feet apart. Fortunately, much of the stress and fear was just that, never manifesting into anything more for me or my family. For that, I’m grateful.

- **Coda**

I was cleaning out my work backpack last week, an annual summer tradition aimed at purging waste, locating misplaced items, and lightening the load for a bike commuter. I came across this blue mask. I bought it in August 2020 on Etsy because I liked the bandana-style pattern. I wore it the first day of

Discoveries week with my FSEMerS. I didn’t wear it again. One of the COVID lessons I learned: wear a lighter mask, one that makes it easier to speak and breathe through. So I put it in my backpack and carried it around all year.

I hope I never have to wear it again.



Figure 1: Blue mask, post Pfizer vaccinations.