Teaching Reflection June 2021 – UWP Writing Retreat
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- What were successes?
- Challenges?
- What did you learn about yourself as teacher?
- About your students in these conditions?
- About the nature of writing?
- About course goals and features?

Teaching this year has been uneven, with both unexpected successes and difficulties stemming primarily from the hybrid/hi-flex modality. My courses were spread out over all three quarters, affording a wider perspective on the arc of COVID's impact on classroom life. In 5 of the 6 courses, in-person classroom attendance was abysmal, less for actual COVID-related quarantine than for other reasons, including students' mental health struggles and overall convenience. Some of the convenience-driven remote participation was driven by schedule constraints (e.g., students sandwiched by fully digital classes before and after our in-person sessions), but more often, students zoomed from dorm room beds not 10 minutes' walk from class.

Even for those who logged in remotely, only 1-3 students would regularly turn on their cameras or participate verbally. The impact on class community during hi-flex sessions was severe; for fully digital Zoom sessions, there was better participation because the perceptual disjuncture between in-person and digital spaces was less pronounced. Classroom camera/mic setups were more often an impediment to classroom discussion and collaboration than an advantage. Fully online, synchronous classes have a considerable advantage to hi-flex settings, affording the opportunity to engage small groups through breakout rooms with some degree of confidentiality and focus. Still, though, the sense of shared stakes is completely lost in a fully online setting due to the absence of meaningful shared

space; in stead, we have mere alignment of individual time slots, complete with the distractions and comforts of individual student space. For this reason, it will be even more critical for DU as a campus-based community to create shared, synchronous, physical encounters in the fall; students need to be anchored to the phenomenal, emotional experience of being in one another's presence as we learn.

Even with these challenges, the digital ethnographic field narrative proved to be a resilient assignment in the face of COVID, affording students both the comfort and safety of their home environments and also opportunities to apply rhetorical concepts to the digital modalities and digital publics they engage daily, but haven't considered in rhetorical terms (e.g., TikTok pasta recipes, YouTube makeup and carpentry tutorials). So, too, did the application of craft as meditative/expressive argument provide students opportunities to apply rhetorical thinking and reflective writing *about* their rhetorical thinking to practices of self care, which, given the emotional precarity of students during the school year, was more important than just about anything else. In line with the work of those who research the phenomenal experience of digital ethnographic inquiry (Pink 2015, Pink et al 2015), taking the time to have students narrate the perceptual shifts and disjunctures of interpreting videos and chat threads through sense memory seems like an important address of embodied rhetoric our classes need now more than ever.

> **Commented [LC1]:** Addresses "the nature of writing"

To that end, I'm thinking of restructuring both my 1122 and 1133 classes so that I can fold this kind of translation work into my discussions on multimodality early on. I'd love to see even a small required critical source component or library orientation worked into FSEMS or 1122, since there is just not enough time to teach all the things we need to (and affirm best practices) in 1133. In this way, we might assure greater continuity over the arc of the entire first year series, rather than scattershot references to critical source evaluation throughout. To that end, I would like to see the program norm the rigors of what that looks like in terms of our critical source evaluation course

goals, even if certain competencies are not stated outright in course goals on the website. I had students in 1133 who had never heard of attribution, and when I checked with colleagues, they said they never talked about it in their 1122. While broad rhetorical disposition is important, it's not enough for their critical literacy to say, "research the rhetorical situation for how to cite evidence appropriately." Attribution's basic to not just academic writing, but public writing of all kinds. One can balance student comfort and expressive-ness in key assignments and still demand (citational) rigor, while naming it for the discourses it builds on.

Sidenote to 1122: the past couple of years, I've implemented an assignment that makes use of proprioception (manipulation of objects) to emphasize structure and analysis, thought post-it notes for outlining/mapping and LEGOS. All of that was completely lost in digital space, even as I provided the materials to students on the first day for later use. In future face to face 1122s, I would like students to be able to use that proprioceptive modeling all year long – which means I need to get students individual LEGO sets and full post-it kids so that I can return to the physical habit of modeling/movement throughout the quarter, and not just once or twice.

PEER REVIEW: Because few students attended even Zoom sessions for class, it was difficult to hold them accountable to one another (even when reviews were grade-bearing parts of the course). For that reason, peer review saw large-scale lack of buy-in with student groups both asynchronously and during class sessions. In future courses, should we maintain the benefits of the Zoom modality, building on the example of David Daniels's digital review approach, I plan to structure more formal small group meetings in which A) students attend having done more scaffolded review beforehand, and B) I attend to ask students to narrate the effectiveness of papers beyond minutiae to wider rhetorical effectiveness of a given assignment. I have had students come to group conferences in my office before COVID, but the digital modality threw all of that off track; it will require more time of students, and as such,

might warrant scaling back of other materials (though I am always loathe to do so).

Personal Impact/Writing beyond DU: What I learned about myself as a teacher is that not having an affectively, physically, emotionally synchronous dialogue with students is exhausting. Having them not care and not showing up to physical class for weeks on end is like cheerleading in solitary confinement. I had better relationships with my imprisoned writers in different parts of the state solely by correspondence than my hi-flex students. The other aspect of this comparison, however, is being reminded that community-based writing that guides writers to think about craft and process as part of their own meaning-making and healing is vital to meaningful writing; without the framing, it's difficult to see how far you've come, or chart course for where you want to be professionally or as a human.

At the same time, my Honors students in "Writing and the Public Good" affirmed the remarkable rhetorical potential and philosophical work of public writing every week, as students worked remotely with representatives from the global nonprofit Elevation Web, a web design and user experience (UX) consultancy that helps nonprofits use technology to advance their missions toward a more just world. Even as students were physically present in synchrony, digital technologies enabled us to build and learn from one another from Denver, Chicago, New Hampshire, and Argentina. Students interviewed not only Emily Friedrichs, Communications & Partnerships Manager, but also EW Content Strategist Brittany Frater Jordt, and EW client Kelly Hollimon, Executive Director for Our Path (formerly the Straight Spouse Network), to better understand the digital ecologies that shape a nonprofit's rhetorical success online and beyond, as well as the subtle (and often invisible) ways that user experience design facilitates uptake and action beyond a mere awareness campaign.

These conversations gave students meaningful bridges between theoretical frameworks that define the nature of publics and rhetorical address (Warner 2002, Crawford 2015), best practices

published by social innovation scholarship ([Christiano & Niemand 2017](#), [Brown et al 2010](#)), and their own understanding of how they navigate digital space as citizens and consumers. After generating interview data for an exhibit on the Clinic for Writing and the Public Good website, students had the option of composing blogs for Elevation Web's [Thought Leadership division](#); they are currently featured on the front of Elevation's [blog page](#). Writing in the style of Elevation's blog presence, student [Aubrey Robert Cox](#) plays with narrative sequence to explore the role of AI in UX design, while student [Sloane Kipp](#) places Elevation's work in the context of our WRIT 1733 project to explore the nature of writing for the public good.

But while UX design attuned students to procedural rhetorics of preparatory work that remains largely unseen (e.g., HTML code), the logistical challenges of working with a partner debilitated (and displaced internationally) by a severe diagnosis reoriented us to what it means to write with and for a community when one's own labor is derailed or rendered invisible by unexpected events. Here, kairos, the granular nature of design work, and simply writing a thank you card took on ethical and philosophical significance, reminding us of what writing can do to impart the smallest kindness, or mark the passage of being together in time, if not in place – even when frustrated by a writing process or interview protocol that isn't seamless.

Thinking about WAC/WAG: In thinking about the work the Writing Program does outside of instruction, I am committed to the idea that the dispositional work we've done in the Writing Accountability Groups this year helps faculty (primarily TT faculty) think more purposefully about how their own metacognitive work (especially surviving COVID) also informs their teaching – both in terms of assignment design philosophy, and scaffolding. There's preliminary qualitative data to support that claim, and I'm hopeful that maintaining that practice across campus can reinforce the fabric of what the UWP does in terms of a campus-wide culture of writing.