Frustrations and Innovations in Hi-Flex FSEM, 1533, and 1733 classrooms

April Chapman-Ludwig

"Professor Chapman, the students on zoom can hear you talking but we can't hear students in the classroom when they are answering questions."

"Okay, thanks Sam. Let's try to unmute whenever we answer a question so those on zoom can hear. Alison, did you unmute."

"Sorry about that."

"Professor Chapman, now we can hear but everything is echoing on zoom" "We can hear classmates clearly but you twice."

"Okay, thanks Sam. I will try to repeat Allison's question and then summarize the answer for you."

Last Spring, during the shift to completely online classes, I felt confident my 12 years of prior online teaching experience would help me better adapt to pandemic circumstances. For the most part, it did. My courses were organized, challenging, but adaptable. My course evaluations were strong, and I felt like I weathered the storm. Returning to a face-to-face FSEM course in the Fall, was a very different experience. Much of the mentoring and natural connections fostered by off-campus excursions were removed. Discoveries field trips were gone, I was teaching nineteen students in a lecture hall that seats one hundred, and projecting through a mask was impossible. As the conversation above suggests, there were many logistical challenges. Lecture notes were now online, zoom recordings were a staple, I built six new Prezi presentations, breakout rooms became the best way to work in groups, and I shifted many creative in-class assignments into multi-modal work. This year was defined by frustrations and then, innovations.
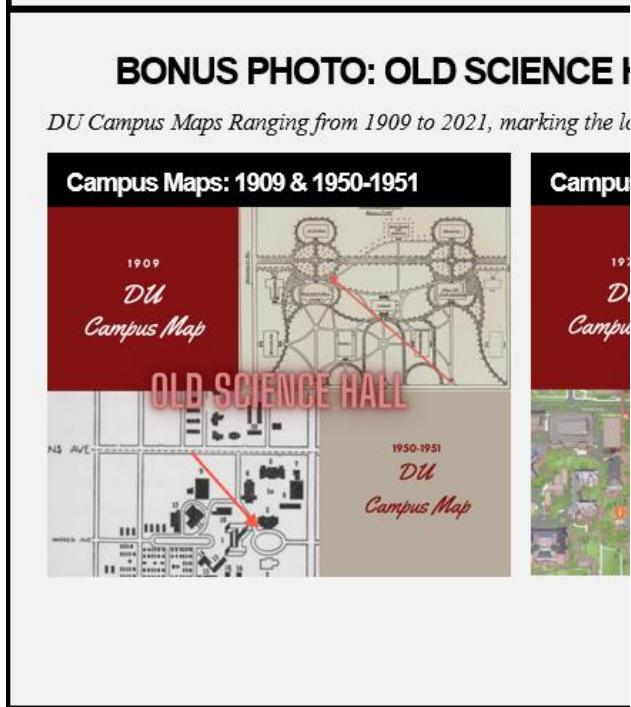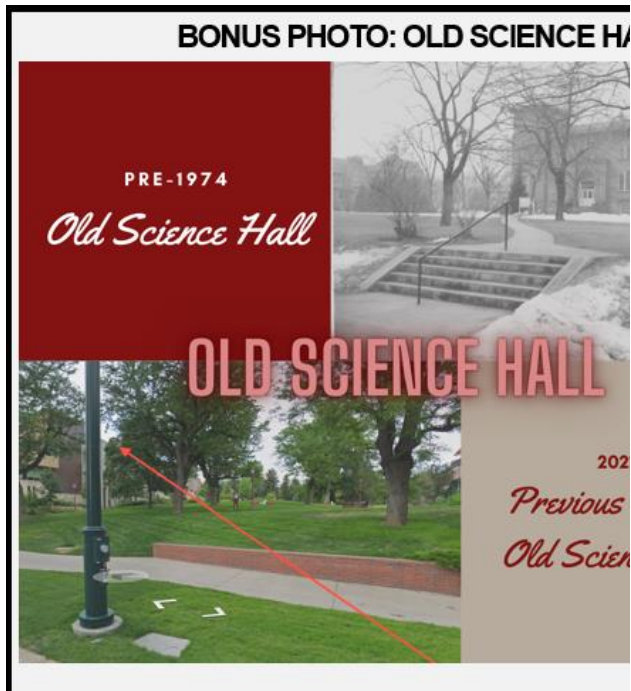
I have learned to adapt and be flexible more than I have ever done in the 21 years I have been a teacher. I can now say I have taught in every modality, face-to-face, online asynchronous, online synchronous, hybrid, and Hi-flex. With flexibility came the burden of extra work. I found myself adapting in-class work for breakout rooms and finding unique ways to get students more involved in class discussion. One of the first frustrations I encountered were students who "attended" class via zoom with cameras off. While rare, there were moments when it was clear the student had logged into the class session but was not actively participating or was not present behind the screen. I didn't realize this was happening until I sent students to breakout rooms to work together and the student who was no longer present didn't accept the breakout room invitation. I knew I couldn't require students to keep their cameras on. There are good reasons for students to have their cameras off including high levels of stress/anxiety while everyone is looking at them in a brady bunch box and the potential for learning in a difficult or inhospitable environment. A good handful of students in my class were zooming from home, states away, rather than from a dorm. However, as Virginia Pitt, OTL's Director of University Teaching suggests, I knew there needed to be a way to "encourage camera use that best supports learning, engagement, and well-being for all members of the classroom community (including ourselves)," so teachers do not feel like they are "teaching into the abyss." My answer to avoiding the abyss was to set clear expectations for breakout rooms, including telling all students that I would be joining the discussion. Using breakout rooms fully for the first time also allowed students to meet other students they would not have normally if sitting in a classroom. Students have a tendency to sit next to peers they know or peers that are in close proximity. One of

my students told me it was the most social interaction she had all quarter and she was thankful to meet so many different students in the class. I also created group led discussions on theoretical concepts (i.e. feminism, new historicism, Marxism, Psychoanalytic, queer theory). Students didn't need to have their cameras on but needed to take turns speaking. The engagement was much stronger after implementing both changes. In a comment on the course evaluation, one student spoke about the strength of assignments and said, "Applying lenses and doing the mashups were beneficial to looking at fairy tales in different ways. I liked the eportfolio assignments overall. Using zoom even if we were in person was beneficial for taking notes and working with others on assignments."

Heading into the winter quarter I had another unique challenge in teaching a 1533 transfer student class that was meant to build on community engagement. The question was how to create social connections between transfer students when not all the students are in class and the class is very small? As well as how to participate in archival work, in field research, in field trips, during a pandemic. Two of my students requested to stay on zoom all quarter due to taking care of immunocompromised family members. Somehow, I needed to revise assignments and excursions in a way that allowed students fully on zoom to participate. Due to the smaller nature of the class (8 students) I decided to tailor assignments more closely to individual needs. This created additional work but allowed everyone to participate.

Archival work was done completely online through DU's archive and via video tutorial. The campus photo scavenger hunt was revised to allow students on zoom to be present on campus through Google Earth. Surprisingly, the strongest presentation was actually the pair of students who participated through zoom alone and worked together to find campus locations through Google Earth.

They knew the limitations of being online would make the work harder, so they decided to use as many resources as they could online to dig into DU's history. Below are two different slides from their presentation on a notoriously difficult bonus photo they recreated for extra credit. It may not look like much but to do this work they had to consult Google Earth, a special historical handout, DU's library archive, and view for different sets of maps.

BONUS PHOTO: OLD SCIENCE HALL

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DU Campus Maps Ranging from 1909 to 2021, marking the l...

I also worked with History Colorado Center to allow archival work with masks. Students were limited by interaction in exhibit spaces but could talk about the differences in encountering these spaces in a pandemic when writing observational notes. To prompt attendance, which was a problem in the Fall, students were encouraged to bring a friend, family member, or spouse to the museum. I brought a colleague, one student brought a friend, and another brought a spouse. This allowed them to share their experience with people they cared for and wanted to be around while also introducing them to the peers they worked with in class. Field research with interviewing, while tricky to do in person, was conducted via zoom. Listening to David Riche's ideas for how to further their interview experiences, I also had students in the current course interview prior transfer students from years past. Current students were able to then create a data set from the experiences of past transfer students and could compare these experiences with their own. Conducting field research in this way also allowed us to move beyond the small classroom community to build connections with students that had gone through the class before them. The interviews also became valuable for some of my previous 2018 students who connected with me once again. One student reached out to ask for a letter of recommendation to graduate school and, explained that she was, "inspired by your desire to improve the college experience for transfer students and appreciate the ways in which you refocus learning on the individual." Embracing individual needs while still building community connections will be a focus I will continue to incorporate in my classes moving forward.

In the spring, more complications occurred when teaching a 1733 honors course focused on documentary storytelling. Pre-pandemic, students would complete premier pro workshops, screen documentaries in class, and spend time editing their own documentaries in Digital Media Services where they would also have an array of professional video equipment they could rent to complete their mini documentaries. Once again, I was faced with a tough question. How do I help my Honor students with documentary technology when Media Services is closed, and they can't check out any equipment? I considered asking for a grant or to put aside Writing Program money

to purchase a couple professional cameras, so students could check out equipment for their filming. However, the logistics of checking out the equipment proved frustrating in a pandemic so instead, I leaned into filming on phones. I was finally able to give all students free access to Lynda.com and assigned students a tutorial on how to film using their phone on Lynda.com. We watched short documentary clips that were filmed on smartphones, I set up an online tutorial for Premiere Pro with Media Services, and I spent additional time discussing camera techniques.

My expectations for the final documentary cuts were low but I was pleasantly surprised when students presented their work at the end of the quarter. In fact, I have already encouraged a few groups to submit their work to Fall Showcase. In his final portfolio reflection, a student commented that "This class gave me a reason to get back into filmmaking and video editing. The difference, though, was that this project felt real. We worked as a team, divided the workload, interviewed social actors, met deadlines, and presented something I felt proud of in front of others. It felt powerful, like I was in a special position to control the narrative, to reflect the views of those who we interviewed, and to extend those views to connect them to the story we as a filmmaking group were trying to tell." Many students in the class reflected on similar themes. Frustrations or not, they figured out a way to innovate and be proud of the work they accomplished in class even with pandemic limitations. At the end of a long year, I am content in knowing I can also deal with additional zoom frustrations in my class if the end results in students feeling they were invested and accomplished work they are proud of.