Situating Joy: Reflections on Teaching Writing during COVID

Prelude

"I have never enjoyed writing as much as I have while taking your class."
–WRIT 1133 Student Email, June 15, 2021

Joy was about the last thing I expected students to associate with my class during a pandemic. I was honestly shocked and moved when I opened my email 5 days after submitting grades to find a student's line above. During this pandemic year, I've focused on helping students and myself just get through. How can we move forward, pursue meaningful priorities, and preserve our sanity when the world has turned upside down? And yet, this student's comment makes me wonder if joy itself might be the best antidote to pandemic fatigue.

How can I be a better teacher? How can I ensure I'm available, fully resourced, to support students to the best of my ability? How can I enjoy my work—and how might doing so make it more sustainable both for students and myself?

The pandemic has forced me, or provided a valuable opportunity, to focus on my process as a teacher in new ways. With so many students needing extra support via meetings, reminders, an advocate to connect them with resources for managing stress, extreme anxiety, or even, as in one case, suicidal ideations, I've felt unusually drained as a teacher. Especially as we approached the anniversary of lock down, my reserves for refining assignments, grading efficiently, and also supporting students in need felt exhausted, almost insufficient for the demands.

Plus, parenting our toddler. I felt my patience with her wearing thin, especially when she'd be home sick from daycare for a week or more because she couldn't go to school with a runny nose—which seems like a perpetual condition of toddlerhood. Amid the piles of laundry, dish-covered counters, and toy-flooded floors, I felt too exhausted to enjoy her songs and dancing feet, too rushed for bedtime--and thereby evoking more tears and tantrums--just so I could get back to grading. That was the wake-up call.

I found myself asking new, more urgent versions of questions I've been increasingly contemplating over the past few years: How can I manage and balance my work commitments so that I can be the person my students, colleagues—and family—need, when they need me?

The pandemic sharpened my focus on such questions, although I've been mulling versions of them over for years, sparking inspiration for designing courses around themes of mindfulness and habits, and for improving my grading process. Since teaching FSEM in 2018—the most anxious group of students I've ever worked with--I've also been increasingly attuned to students' stress levels. For pandemic teaching, my main goal was pairing my courses down to their essence, centering both my WRIT 1122 & 1133 courses around 4 main projects instead of my usual 5-6. In addition, teaching asynchronously online since Spring 2020 made my daily assignment structure more transparent. Typically, my in-person classes often include spontaneous freewriting to allow students to process class discussions or brainstorm project ideas. Sometimes I'll give these writings a check-mark grade and retroactively enter them in Canvas. But after hearing Brad Benz's and April Chapman-Ludwig's advice about teaching online at our last in-person faculty meeting in March 2020, I tried to streamline, planning almost all the daily assignments in advance. Doing so gave me a more thorough "big picture" of the total amount of work involved in the course—for

both students and myself—and helped me plan my grading time more effectively. Canvas made it easy to view all the assignments in the class and when they were due, so I could plan my grading time in advance. I also kept mental notes about how long it usually took me to grade different types of assignments (discussion posts vs. peer review vs. formal writing projects). By Spring 2021, I was much more effective at planning "grading sprints;" I scheduled assignments with grading time in mind, which helped me respond to assignments when students could use that feedback for their final drafts.

My biggest success? Responding to students' final portfolios and finalizing course grades two days after the Portfolio was due. At the end of an especially exhausting quarter and year, it allowed students and me to wrap up our class quickly and move forward with other endeavors. Not having the grading hanging over my head was an immense source of energy for me at the end of the quarter. For example, I revised a short article about a CCESL mini-grant that Angela Sowa, former student Carly Hudson, and I received 6 weeks early. I also found myself relaxing into the weekend mornings gardening with my daughter instead of worrying about unfinished work. And her meltdowns that had become routine at daycare drop-off subsided the following week. Such immense improvements in both my work and personal life affirm that considering students' and my own holistic well-being in course design can make work more sustainable and sometimes more effective.

Guiding Values from Community-engaged Teaching

In a sense, holistic well-being has informed my course design for years through my focus on community-engaged courses, which I have taught every year I've been at DU—except this pandemic year. Since my first year at DU, I've taught at least one—and sometimes several—community-engaged courses. Community engagement has become a hallmark of my pedagogy, which prioritizes empowering students to experience writing and rhetoric as a means of cultivating personal connections. Such connections show students why rhetoric and writing can matter. I use community engagement in my courses to motivate students, especially ones who feel they "can't write" or have struggled with writing throughout their education. Student motivation seems especially important in required first-year writing courses, where students' interest in course goals is not a given. In addition, rhetorical theory that aims to emphasize why writing matters can come across to first-year students as esoteric or irrelevant—not worth their time to try to understand. Community-engaged projects show students why and how that theory can matter as they apply terms to analyze new rhetorical situations.

For the past 7 years, I've taken between 1 and 4 first-year classes to mentor elementary students at Charles Hay World School. All but two of these partnerships have been with my WRIT 1122 classes, which have worked with every grade level except fourth and kindergarten. As I've revised the course over the years, my primary Charles Hay collaborator and I have focused on partnering DU students with first- and second-graders. DU students work in pairs with the same small group of elementary writers for 6-7 weeks, working face-to-face with them to compose a children's book based on an example by Mem Fox (1st grade) or on a fairy tale (2nd grade). DU students compose a children's book for their specific elementary audience and write a newsletter to their mentees' parents. DU students consistently list this community-engaged work not only as the most meaningful part of the class, but also as a key factor in their understanding of rhetorical terms.

Exigences for WRIT 1122 Course Design: "Rhetoric, Journalism, and Social Justice: A Glimpse into the Past"

Because of the COVID pandemic, we were not able to partner with the elementary school this year. This challenge allowed me reexamine some of my core teaching values—personal connection, student motivation, accessibility, and social justice—outside a community-engaged framework.

My course design was inspired by two former WRIT 1122 students—one who wrote a literacy narrative in 2015 about how award-winning journalist Charles Duhigg's *Power of Habit* helped her cope with a serious injury that stalled her athletic career; and one who in Fall 2018 wrote that she wanted to study a favorite writer's style. I also wanted to give my students a sense of the personal connections that make the community-engaged class so meaningful, even if we couldn't do that work. So I drew on a recommendation John McDermott made in a graduate philosophy course I audited years ago to dedicate oneself to studying another scholar by reading everything they had written. I grounded the course in two assignments that asked students to choose a 20th-century journalist from a list I'd curated and then research that writer's biography and publications. I chose 20th-century journalists especially for the "first draft" of this class because I wanted students to focus primarily on the author's writing and rhetorical choices—and hopefully gain a more well-rounded view of the writer and their rhetorical situation. Studying 20th-century journalists allows students to examine a writer's career over the long term and study potential long-term outcomes of and changes effected by that writer's work. To see writing as more of an endeavor to which some devote their entire lives, especially for important topics such as social justice issues.

Studying journalists involved in social justice efforts focused our attention on why writing matters—and also open deeper possibilities for students to connect with their writers on a more personal level. I also wanted to use this substantial research project to promote diversity and inclusion; the list of journalists I curated with librarian Bridget Farrell prioritized well-known journalists from historically underrepresented groups based on race/ethnicity, religious heritage, gender and/or sexual identity, etc. During a landmark moment for civil rights and racial justice in the U.S., I wanted students to have a sense of the history leading up to this moment—and especially of the role writing played in it. I complemented this list of 20th-century journalists with sample profiles written by contemporary journalists, such as Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah and Hua Hsu, about well-known writers such as James Baldwin and Maxine Hong Kingston. By studying journalists focused on social justice issues—both from the past and present—students could examine how and why writing in and for diverse rhetorical situations matters.

Assignment Sequence

To round out the assignment sequence, I leaned on readings and assignments that have worked well in previous courses. For example, I used Joe Harris's *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* to scaffold the assignment sequence; as I've done with my community-engaged course for several years, I used his chapters on "Coming to Terms" and "Taking an Approach" to frame two major writing assignments—the first, a "Coming to Terms" essay about students' own writing habits, and the third, Rhetorical Analysis of a journalist's work, to help students analyze the writer's "approach" across multiple publications. I also used M. Jimmie Killingsworth's "Rhetorical Situations" chapter from *Appeals in Modern Rhetoric* to frame the rhetorical analysis essay, along with a new text recommended by Rob Gilmor: "Rhetorical

Situations and Their Constituents" by Keith Grant-Davie.

With the first project, a "Coming to Terms" essay, I used Charles Duhigg's *Power of Habit* to frame the course as an exploration of writerly habits of mind and to illustrate the wide range of genres in which some journalists write. I emphasized transfer by using this book to help students reflect at the beginning of the quarter about their current writing habits. Then they revisited these ideas at the end of the quarter to reflect more deeply on their growth. The first reflection was modeled after the literacy narrative assignment I've always taught at the beginning of WRIT 1122, as first suggested by my former teaching partner, Carol Samson. This assignment lets classmates and myself learn more about the attitudes, values, and vulnerabilities everyone brings to the course, helping us build a supportive community of writers.

Then students chose a journalist from the curated list. First, students' researched biographical context about their journalist, giving them a broader sense of their journalist's work and time period. Students wrote this research up in a profile, modelled after sample contemporary profiles by journalists such as Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah and Hua Hsu. The goal was for students to use this research to inform their rhetorical analysis of 2-3 texts written by their journalist. The Rhetorical Analysis essay, in turn, emphasized close reading of the journalists' published texts. Students were to read 5-6 published pieces by the journalist and choose 2-3 to analyze closely for academic readers. Together, the Profile and Rhetorical Analysis essays were intended to help students explore professional writers' habits of mind, conventions of writing, and possible resonances between a writer's life and historical era that may have informed key exigences for their writing—such as Sam Lacy's focus on racism in sports. I wanted students to examine how journalists' publications may have intervened in those exigences. The final Portfolio provided an opportunity not only for students to reflect on their writing, but also on the habits and attitudes they brought with them to WRIT 1122, as narrated in their WP #1: Coming to Terms essay. And to reflect on what they learned from researching a professional writer in-depth.

To support students' research and writing processes, librarian Bridget Farrell and I collaboratively designed two workshops—one for the Profile project and one for the Rhetorical Analysis project—to support students' research. The second workshop in particular mostly focused on mini-conferences with Bridget and me to address students' questions; during the more gregarious 12 pm class, Bridget and I were both talking with students for the entire class period. I also implemented a new peer review process that I developed with Rob Gilmor and Angela Sowa with a Teaching Innovation Grant we received in Fall 2020. With this grant, I focused especially on adapting my small-group conferences to an online synchronous format. In my face-to-face, community-engaged WRIT 1122 class, peer review typically involves students reading and responding to each other's rough drafts online before class, and then I use class time to meet with small groups of 3-4 students for 30 minutes each to discuss the written feedback they exchanged. Since I started structuring peer review this way, students have repeatedly noted on course evaluations how meaningful these conversations are—especially since they deepen their connections with their group members over the course of the quarter. It's always a tight squeeze, though, to talk with everyone in 110 minutes; the last group usually runs 10 minutes late. It's also a meaningful but exhausting process for me. For these reasons, and because the pandemic has isolated students so much from each other, I developed a peer-review process that

removed me from the group so that students could really focus on each other. We peer-reviewed the 3 major writing projects (and did version with a shorter draft of the Portfolio intro essay because finals week was cut). First, students would read and respond to a set of questions about 2 group members' drafts. Then during class, I gave them a list of questions to discuss about using their written feedback to revise and asked students respond to those discussion questions in a shared Google Doc. I also checked in on the Zoom breakout rooms during the peer review sessions (and also during other breakout room sessions throughout the quarter).

I also asked students to reflect on how their discussions and peer review process went after each peer review. By the second half of the quarter, students were asking for a less structured process, so for the 3rd and 4th peer-review sessions, I simply asked students to discuss each writer's questions and draft in turn, with each group member also taking a turn writing notes on the discussion in a shared Google Doc. Students seemed to prefer this structure, especially after getting to know their group over the course of the quarter.

Overall, some groups seemed to gel well, and students noted the value of peer review and their connections with group members in their reflections. I did have an anomaly in which a student expressed concern that her group wasn't supporting her writing enough. Rather than break up all the groups, including ones that were working well, I just tweaked her group by moving all but 1 person from her group and adding some new members, so there was only 1 other person she worked with for the entire quarter. Based on my reading of her group members' written feedback and on their reflections, it seemed like they were putting in a good faith effort. But at the end of the quarter, she complained that I hadn't moved *her* to another group, which I hadn't realized was her primary wish earlier. Because this hasn't happened in all the years I've been using peer review groups—or really since I started teaching thirteen years ago—I want to explore this anomaly in more depth. Given other groups' success, I think elements of this structure have potential, but I'm still thinking through how to adapt it to account for this student's anomalous experience.

Outcomes: How this Class Enacted My Guiding Values

But to what extent did any of this matter to students during a pandemic? Once a class starts, I like to feel that my pedagogical decisions are made in conversation with students, whether that's tailoring lesson plans to their current needs or adjusting course design for a future quarter based on student evaluations. This is one reason I often use mid-quarter check-in surveys, as I did this year, to see how students are processing the course. But especially after reflecting with colleagues while writing this piece, I'm increasingly aware of how hard it actually is to be in such a conversation with students. Student course evaluations are so fraught, and I'm always second-guessing their reflections about their writing because who knows what's genuine and what's a rhetorical performance based on what they think I want to hear. This year, my WRIT 1122 course evaluations were even less specific about assignments or other aspects of the course that benefitted their learning (or not). The few comments students wrote were even more vague than usual in terms of what they liked about me and what they disliked about the course (especially workload, although I did have a student who messaged me mid-quarter thanking me for keeping the workload lighter than his roommate's—a complicated compliment, to say the least).

So, in terms of my own reflections, I am proud of how the choices I made for this course redesign align with my guiding

values—student motivation and rhetorical experiences of why writing matters. Grounding the course in recommendations from former students was a student-centered approach to course design. I also tried to include a diverse range of journalists, so that students could choose a writer whose work resonated with their values and experiences. And despite the complications, it may be worth noting that some students reflected on this sense of personal connection in their final portfolios:

- "A lot of what I aspire to be . . . aligns with what [Alice] Dunnigan accomplished . . . which is the main reason I chose to research and analyze her journalistic texts . . . ."

- "I have really been inspired by Nora [Ephron] as a person as well as her writing capabilities."

Others valued the emphasis on writing habits and habits of mind:

- "The first essay made me hold myself accountable and work on bettering not only my writing but myself."

- "I witnessed a notable shift in my personal writing habits and skills. The rigorous schedule of our writing projects . . . made it so that I could spend more time that I usually would focusing on how to improve my writing and actually displaying my improvement throughout."

- "[B]ecause I was never taught how to make an outline or analyze text . . . I have noticed a huge improvement in my writing from high school to now."

But overall, students' reflections on how this class empowered their voice and sense of agency as writers are the ones I value most:

- "[I]n my academic career as a first-generation college student of color . . . My improvement in this course proved to me that the barriers placed on me based on my identity have not obstructed my growth and potential for greatness. Something I hoped to get out of my overall college experience when I first started here at the University of Denver. "

- "I am able to put my voice into my writing more . . . This is something I am considerably proud of as a writer . . . ."

Even with these complicated comments from students, I do think this course has potential. For example, some of the ratings on my course evaluations were higher this year in categories such as "This course was intellectually challenging" (4.9 average in 2021 vs. 4.4 average in 2020). Moving forward, I'd like to think about how to make the course more meaningful to students—and also enhance student motivation around the topic, since the rating for "I had a strong interest in taking this course" dropped a lot after I removed the community-engaged component. Looking ahead to next year, areas I hope to focus on include: revisiting the role that rhetorical analysis plays in the course and possibly giving students more practice with that skill before writing the paper; adjusting the habit frame to accommodate a shift in rhetorical analysis; enhancing the diversity, equity, and inclusion component of the course, perhaps by introducing more diverse rhetorical traditions and/or by inviting students to reflect more directly on how they see their research relating to contemporary exigences.

Coda

While exhaustion still dominates my rhetorical experience of this year, I'm hopeful about these opportunities to reimagine WRIT 1122 specifically and also my pedagogical habits more broadly. For myself, habits seems most important at this ending point. I'm asking myself what habits, old and new, indirectly weigh down my work. How can I energize myself for teaching, writing, collaborating—and parenting? Where does joy emerge, and how might I cultivate it, both for students and myself? How might attending to the reciprocities between my professional and personal lives cultivate joy?

As I turn toward backyard sprinklers and summer writing, these are the questions I want to make space for exploring.