

The Different Teacher I was Already
Becoming: Revision Plans & Learning By Not
Succeeding

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It seems unreal, hyperreal even, that this year-long experience with pandemic teaching is nearly over. That my feeling that time has been concurrently stretched and constrained these past 15 or so months may never fully cease.

What I've learned about my teaching extends a little further than the pandemic. I'm more than privileged in almost every way that I did not have firsthand experience with a major traumatic experience until I was in my mid-40s. I was trauma-adjacent with some friends and family friends who lost their own loved ones. I never knew one grandparent, barely knew one, and lost my other two grandparents around my early twenties. So perhaps I wasn't that prepared for a slow-burning trauma that began in early 2017. By the start of the Denver lockdown in 2020, that trauma was no longer a slow burn and was instead in the midst of exploding.

I was already in crisis mode when COVID changed all our plans. Knowing that I would be on FMLA in winter 2020, I dramatically altered my "Writing While Board" 1133 course, making it more interactive in class and designing projects and exercises that required physical proximity and tactile engagement with the course's main texts (board games). By the end of March, DU was already moving towards being completely online. I was still on FMLA when the online switch was announced and so I decided to begin changing the course again. I estimate I had to change about 90% of the revisions I had made before taking FMLA.

The different teacher I was already becoming over the past few years developed further in the year+ of pandemic pedagogy. While I taught four courses Spring 2021, I was still surprised by the number of failing grades, all of those due to no major work submitted. One thing that I think I have

begun doing more frequently, before pandemic teaching began, was trying not to "know" the reasons behind supposed student transgressions. This does not mean not caring about what students are learning but focusing attention on creating conditions for learning about writing as a craft and a process while also attending to the humane. Part of remembering the humane is guiding and working with students on their writing and on learning how to navigate university life, but also knowing when to stay back and let them be. Throughout my teaching career, I've often said that students have the right to perform however they see fit in their courses. Sometimes one learns more from not succeeding than by doing well in a course, especially if we look more at the long game and less at the short.

These philosophical musings are important and will remain a part of my pedagogy. Additionally, I made some specific course content changes that I will incorporate into future teaching. One of these changes, the revision plan, is something I plan to introduce into all first-year courses. I have valued something similar to the revision plans for years but haven't formalized it completely until this year. My first use of the plan was in 2021 WRIT 1122. The plan consists of 4 parts: **Part one** asks students for one or more paragraphs in which they summarize any feedback they received from any source at any stage of the writing process, and this part also asks students to describe which revisions of their own they would make to their project; **part two** asks students to discuss which feedback they incorporated into their revision plan and which feedback they rejected or modified; **part three** asks students to describe how they would revise both the introduction and conclusion of their full project based on the revisions they would make as evidenced in **part four, which** allows students to demonstrate their revision plan in action with some sample revised paragraphs.

I have already modified the revision plan some since Winter 2021, but the goal

remains the same: to give students specific criteria to think about and respond to while also helping strengthen their authorial agency as young writers. My initial revision plan limited their number of sample revised paragraphs (**part four** above) to one to three paragraphs. Neither of those numbers were sufficient, so I changed the requirement to three to five paragraphs. Nothing is inherently magical about these numbers. They just provide a range to aim for and some flexibility for students with different rhetorical needs to do work more valuable for them.

The revision plan will become part of multiple courses. One new item will become standard specifically to my “Writing While Board” WRIT 1133. Above I wrote about the substantial changes I made to that course in November 2019, most of which were rendered moot with the switch to online teaching because of their dependence on physical proximity between students and to the tactile acts of playing, studying, writing, and building games together. I attempted to convert a course very much built on physical games and in-person analysis into a virtual experience. The main thing that I’ve struggled with in “Writing While Board” over the years has been the amount of writing students complete for the final project, a game mock-up. In the pre-Covid years I asked students to write and design a game that makes their research playable, in essence giving players an opportunity to interact with the research the student(s) gathered. What happened too often with this design aspect was that students would get too bogged down by making tokens, game boards, and other miscellany associated with board games. I loved all of it. The creativity and the sheer fun on display. However, the writing was buried too much in the mix. I added a “textbook” to the course that I hoped would encourage students to focus more on their writing. This “textbook”, *The White Box*, includes several dozen generic pieces common to board games. My thinking was that these generic components would allow students to think how those pieces

would fit in their game and still encourage them to write at least 1500 revised words for their final project.

I haven’t completed a fuller analysis of this generic game pieces approach yet, but an early eye shows that overall students produced fascinating and insightful games that built clearly from their research. A few students even slightly broke away from the project requirements and included some of their own design work. Part of me thinks doing so was a bad decision as one of our course readings strongly cautions against designing one’s own pieces, boards, and so on, as a publisher will likely handle their own art. Still, I struggled over whether to take away this component not only because it animates creativity for students but also engages them in some modest multimodal work. Perhaps I’ll continue to struggle with finding some balance here. Most likely I will continue to rely on a final aspect of hyperreality that Covid teaching that I think most of us learned we already possess: the flexibility to respond to exigencies that allow us to pivot in useful directions.