

Just in Time Teaching

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Around the end of February 2020, “COVID-19” was spoken with equal parts recognition and speculation among Writing Program faculty. Would our largest gathering, the Conference on College Composition and Communication even take place? What about the conferences the rest of the year? Word had started to spread about schools and universities considering shutting down, but that wasn’t our immediate concern then. By March 10, DU’s Chancellor shared that there were 16 COVID-19 cases in Colorado. But there were only [30 deaths](#) in all of America. The World Health Organization declared a pandemic. Shortly after, the chancellor closed campus for finals week of Winter term, and by March 17, wrote that all of the Spring 2020 term would be online. There were now 143 deaths in North America. There was still a fair amount of uncertainty about the state of the world. This was before masks were de rigueur, and you could have a slice of lemon meringue pie at the counter in a restaurant. By March 18, grocery store shelves were bare, save chicken gizzards, an image of which I still think about. Were we desperate but not that desperate?



Two days later, the Conference on College Composition and Communication [cancelled](#) their meeting.

By March 25, Governor Jared Polis ordered [Coloradans to stay at home](#).

There were [1,284](#) dead from the virus in America.

Teaching would move online for all. I liked to say at the time that I had been preparing my whole life for this. Teaching online is second nature to me. I study online communities, after all. While I was disappointed that I wouldn’t get to teach the original class on escape rooms for the social good that I had planned, I created new materials, new assignments, and a new approach during Spring break, and I was ready to go. Around this time, I entered the Pandemic Pedagogy group on Facebook, and I quickly realized that the switch to online teaching was going to be far worse for many. I eventually stopped reading the calls for help because it was just too much. The year turned out to be just too much for all of us. Yes, for many, spirits seemed to persevere, jokes were made, and new hobbies were tried on like the frantic clothing changes that we do before we

meet new people. And there was writing, and research, and teaching, and the wheels of learning and the university continued. But that doesn't change the fact that it was all too much.

Midway through the Spring 2020 term, and if the 17th century Venetians had any say, quarantine¹ was over, but it really wasn't. We were still online, teaching merrily, and students were enamored with the novelty. I had shifted my class that Spring to talking about the pandemic, and the students kept weekly logs in writing, images, and video² about how they were passing their time in isolation. So many of them went home to families who would keep them company. From week to week, they wrote about hobbies they picked up, from skateboarding to trying to learn how to do a [backflip](#). They wrote at length about the news and public opinion, [one student writing](#), "I'm disheartened by the current news of people protesting against the stay at home orders across the nation, yet I'm not surprised at all. Here in Highland Park/Dallas (in the very white, top 10 richest neighborhoods in the nation), everyone here calls Covid 19 the 'Scamdemic.'" [Some](#) spoke openly about depression. It was all too much.

70,537 Americans were dead.

A year later, in May 2021, comedian Bo Burnham released the Netflix special *Inside*, which he shot and edited throughout his isolation during the pandemic. There's a moment about 18 minutes from the end when he tries to describe that he had been working on the special since the beginning of

the pandemic. The scene ends the way that I feel about this very essay. In some ways, I've been working on writing this essay since last Spring. However, it's all too much.

From Spring 2020 to Spring 2021, 610,000 Americans died of the coronavirus. I taught 8 courses. Writing teachers spend a lot of time interacting with students through their writing, so moving into an online learning situation is easy to navigate. Commenting³ on student writing takes a fair amount of time, sometimes more as students grapple with new strategies, sometimes less, as students might have revised something 4 times already. You would think with all the time devoted to commenting on writing, more studies would be done looking at that time commitment, but alas, the most notable expert on the topic, Richard Haswell (2006), cites only two studies, and settles on a tidy 7 minutes per page. Fair enough. Sure, most writing teachers that I know of comment on papers more than once, but 7 minutes a page is fine. A feature of our WRIT courses is that students will write 20-25 pages of work, so let's just say 280 hours commenting on papers of the 15 or so students in each of those 8 classes.

Of course, classes require a fair amount of preparation. Reading, designing activities, writing materials and assignments all take time. I'm not even sure if it is even possible to make a claim about how much time that would take. A couple dozen or so hours for every course sounds as close as I might get, putting us in the 190-hour range from Spring to Spring.

¹ During the bubonic plague's march into Italy in the 17th century, isolation was for *quarantina* or "forty days," in which the disease killed somebody or didn't.

² A motivation for sharing their work publicly during the class was so that future readers could see snapshots of pandemic life. Since the course has been over, one writer's blog disappeared, and another two changed their settings to private, but the rest of it is still that to read. They gave their permission to share their work publicly.

³ Throughout the literature, the lore, and hallways of writing programs everywhere, this is often called grading, which I have always found frustrating. I spend very little time "grading." I spend my time offering feedback to writers. Maybe it is the extra syllable that commenting requires over the term grading. Grading also changes our role to audiences outside our sphere, so that it becomes something we are focused on. Most writing teachers I know are not—they, in fact, will say that they dislike grades or the notion of evaluative writing with a mark because it bellies the rhetorical situatedness of the writing to begin with. A writer can learn a lot from writing, but it might not meet the assignment. A student can strictly perform something for a grade that has no impact on their skill or their sense of future writing tasks. Grading is, in fact, the worst word for what writing teachers do.

During this past year, I taught all of my courses online, asynchronously, save one section, which I set a one-day-a-week meeting time to check in, answer questions, and often, play a game using Kahoot!, an online question and answer application. Instead of the 293 hours of in-person classroom interactions that I would have had, I substituted those with online conferences and short topic-driven videos. I produced 13 hours of videos for 7 of my 8 courses, having one course entirely driven by the written materials. So that's 7.72's worth of *John Wick* (who am I kidding—it's more like 7.02's worth of *My Dinner with Andre*). Video production takes time. It took me about 5 hours to write, graphically design, shoot, and edit each video. They are not great (my own estimation), but my students thought they were good, and more importantly, they learned from them. That comes to about 20 minutes per each minute of produced video, or a production commitment of 278 hours.

According to my online schedule, I conferenced with students virtually for 60 hours.

So, some quick back of the envelope math⁴ and carry the 1. During the pandemic, the time I put into my online teaching (102 hours per class) was about the same amount of time that I would have put into an in-person class (95 hours per class), but it felt like (way) more. And students “saw” me less. By the end of the class, their writing was as strong as pre-pandemic courses I have taught, but that's a false comparison because I had to change many things across all my classes, so we weren't part of the same experience as before. I am happy

⁴ That's a fiction. I use Excel for everything.

with the work they did. I'm happy with the work that I did.

However, I'm not sure what it means except that the time accounting of teaching motivated by the perception that it felt like more work. A common question to ask now that things are transforming yet again into a model shaped by our year teaching in a pandemic and a desire to “get back to normal”⁵ is what lessons are we taking away from this year. I often say that the pandemic was a reminder that we should be generous and compassionate with students. I don't know if that is a new lesson, but it is one that resonates more when we consider that 2.34% of the world's population came down with a disease that killed 3,886,000 of them and left many more with long term side effects that we are still trying to figure out. A lesson that is important as students' expectations were profoundly disrupted by where they ended up living, what they were doing, and how they saw themselves in an unpredictable civic, cultural, and economic landscape. Generosity with our time, our attentions, and our expertise shifts our teaching commitment towards motivations that drove many of us to the profession in the first place—to make the world a better place.

The end of the year brings new insight into changes in learning that is making me rethink how and what we teach in writing courses. This isn't new lesson nor pandemic lesson, per se, but it has hastened some parts of what the Internet's development has brought about, and that is a shift in the paradigm of teaching delivery. It wasn't that long ago, teaching meant coverage, oriented

⁵ What does that even mean? First of all, whether your preference is for Tom Wolfe or the Shangri-Las, you can never go home. A lot of teaching shifts that occurred during the pandemic gave some students new opportunities to express themselves. Online sessions provided opportunities for students who were sick or had to travel to participate in a class. Sure, come fall 2021, we can tell them “no, in class or your absent” but should we? Second of all, what is/was normal? The pandemic wasn't the only culturally relevant thing that gripped our national attention. This is a moment to review our goals and outcomes, and consider how *how* we teach can be inclusive, relevant for those who weren't a part of deciding that in the first place. What was normal wasn't all that great in some ways.

towards a **just-in-case** model of learning. Information was presented to be memorized, tucked away in skill or knowledge for some later use. This made sense when literacy and access was limited. It also made sense in a world with limited opportunity for some, and for them, a limited set of expectations. In a literate-rich world, skills and knowledge shift in meaning. For some time, **just-in-time** learning is the preferred way that we have come to experience the complex and information-rich world. The Internet has hastened it by adding almost immediate access. Most work we do, whether for our community, our jobs, or ourselves, requires more access to just-in-time learning and [reminders](#), and as such, our literacy skills need to be more versatile.⁶

I developed a lot of written handouts this past year, and I commented on discussion channels throughout the year.⁷ However, students responded the best to written commentary and videos that they could review while working on their papers. Those were the materials that they used the most. Why 4,000 words of reading was ignored in favor of a 14-minute video, both of which would take about the same amount of time, is beyond me except that I think there is an immediacy in the video that isn't present in the reading. For those of us who study texts, scanning recursively, searching, and parsing out the salient details seems easy, but for student writers, the video medium seems to offer preferable means of advice.

So what does that mean when we are all back in the classroom again? What should class time look

like? Student writers can't rewind and save what happens in the discussions or lectures that take place there. One obvious translation is to focus even more on individual projects, so that each class is devoted to a part of a project. I guess turning a writing class into woodshop (next week is bench week!) might be appealing, but it does very little in teaching versatility and agency. There is an alternative interpretation of the shift in preference for just-in-time teaching, and that is that we devote even more hours to our teaching, producing on-demand videos, plus previously written materials, plus in-person teaching (and commenting and responding and developing activities). That's an unsatisfactory interpretation as well. We cannot cover everything, nor lead writers down the path of learned helplessness. There has to be something left for craft. Not just the artifice of the written word, but the transformation of language to do something to an audience. Teaching that is too directive, and writing becomes filling in the blanks; too many resources, and writing becomes an overwhelming chore. In either case, it's all too much, and we just got through with that.

Of course, writing teachers already considers this. This is not a new lesson. We have, I think, addressed it by resetting for a new class, which asks us to "build to" rather than "build up," which is to say, a new situation requires we first understand the situation before adding to the context. Teaching in the pandemic was often met with resources from offices and well-meaning consultants that asked us to build up and forget about the fact that students needed first to be built

⁶ I like the idea of sharing process points in my writing. In a linear piece, there is rarely a moment to do that seamlessly. When I was younger, I was enthralled by the books of fantasy author Piers Anthony. At the end of many of his books, he would share the story of how he wrote the book, or some bit about his life or writing process, and I loved the idea of seeing behind the scenes. COVID-19 teaching, especially in those early months, created those moments for me as a teacher. I often shared how I came up with an assignment or how I expected an assignment to go as we were all working on the assignment. Not only was that teaching fourth wall broken, the writing fourth wall is broken here because this graf here is the very first graf I wrote for this essay. And yet, here it is, second to the final graf. Writing is weird.

⁷ I guess I forgot that part in my time-on-teaching bit. No doubt, I forgot other things as well.

to. I hope returning to the in-person classroom resets this tendency. I also hope it reminds us to be generous and compassionate. And most of all, I hope it invites us to consider how we spend our time.