How the Pandemic Taught Me to Stop Worrying and Love "Flow"

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What's really worth doing in a writing class? The pandemic brought that question into focus. It certainly wasn't a new question for me; as an ardent lifelong writing student, going back to the early 70s when I first got the bug, and then as a graduate student in writing and then as a director of writing programs and as a writing teacher, I'd been after it in various ways for decades. But the pandemic brought the kind of urgency that I face when planning a long camping trip, or when moving to a new location across the country: What do you *really* need? What's just here because you've grown accustomed to its presence, or think maybe you *might* need it someday? I'll arrive at the answer that "flow," often maligned as a simplistic novice idea, is the regular multi-tool for teaching writing—the one thing I almost always use. But it will take some traveling to get there.

First, of course, came the sudden need to figure out what was worth doing without any class. I'd taught "asynchronous online" (AO) classes back in the very early days of course management software, when most of my students had dial-up access. So I chose to use that "modality," as we currently call types of classes, in the suddenly distant Spring Quarter of 2020. While students and their online capabilities have changed greatly, most of the same fundamentals applied. A writing course consists mainly of writing and getting reactions to that writing, being guided to try a variety of productive approaches and then gaining some sense of how it worked. Writing students need to interact with their classmates and their teacher mainly to build a better sense of how new genres of writing work while they are trying them out. We can do those things online; in in many ways, the more we do them in writing, the better.

The largest shift, though, was something that's been building gradually over the years, but that has reached a critical stage. Despite what scholars and researchers have learned over the last few decades about how writing improves, most students' K-12 writing experiences have been shaped by a poorly informed rush to standardize learning experiences. As my students tell it, high school students these days mainly write for testing, using formulaic structures ("each paragraph should have …") and "vocabulary test" approaches to style. When asked simply to make sense and communicate, they often falter, as if asked drive a car that has no accelerator, brakes, or steering wheel—even though they regularly practice making sense and communicating on social media accounts, where they inventively both use and subvert a wide variety of more realistic, socially responsive forms, a far more daunting task. Their strongly habituated senses tell them that *serious* writing has very limiting formulas. That's part of why when we teach rhetoric, they grab hold of a naively reduced "formula" version of the Aristotelian appeals—add *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*—and resist getting into the more unavoidably fluid nature of the entire rhetorical situation—audience, genre, constraints, stasis, and more.

That means their college writing classes must do something else—and just about anything else will do—to break up the largely useless, highly limiting formulaic patterns that have become, for so many, their main approach to academic writing. There's something to creative destruction, simply

loosening the hold of formulaic writing and letting a natural creativity restore itself. But to make stronger progress, in particular they need to find new ways to organize sequences of discussion and language so that both *flow* (I'll reserve defending that oft-abused but worthy ideal for later). We need to offer students new ways through.

Pandemic circumstances, of course, strongly constrained what a writing class *can* do. Many students had their lives torn apart as families lost sources of income, homes, medical care, child care, and more. As family support crumbled, many students found that they were tied into family in ways they'd forgotten or ignored. The pandemic disrupted strictly individual life in multiple ways too, changing work spaces and schedules. As teachers, we found the reports of all that trouble credible, because it happened to us, too. Sure, we have to hold in the back of our minds that this effect varied greatly from person to person. Some worked from the sun room of the family summer home (pressed into amiable service as a pandemic retreat) and welcomed having something to do with their time; but some had no place and less time to work at all. Teachers know about all that from our own experiences, too. Since the problems so often related to potentially embarrassing personal and family matters, it seemed churlish to do anything other than trust everyone about everything.

As a natural outgrowth of all that, added to threats to both our health and to the social systems on which we rely, the pandemic induced widespread trauma, with all its psychological effects. And yet the economic situations of schools, teachers, and students alike all demanded that we press forward, even if doing so would deepen that trauma and risk more lives. Meanwhile, the experience was shaped by three emerging social trends. First, at the most general level, online social media have accelerated and "packaged" social experience; we all knew what everyone else was feeling and found ways to define our experiences and build social identities around them. So the experience of pandemic trauma became a recognized *thing* and a point of social identification. Second and third, in ways perhaps too closely related to be separated, the rising costs of higher education and the higher risks of failure strengthened a sense of trauma surrounding everything about college education, above all grades. We can leave mostly aside here that students believe grades matter far more than any empirical study can justify, and that their sense of teachers "piling on work" was historically unjustified (nearly all college teachers reduced workloads—for self-preservation, among other reasons). The beliefs themselves established conditions for trauma that we could do very little to reduce. Thus, an experience that already comes with a lot of emotional overload and potential for trauma raised even stronger risks.

Those risks intensify in writing classes for reasons well-known among writing teachers. Our smaller classes and deep involvement with individual work means we get to know students well, and students know that. There's no place to hide in a writing class. Work with writing is, by its nature, intensely emotional and personal, necessarily involving our sense of identity itself. Our writing life extends our sense of self, as if viscerally, exposing us to all the risks that come with greater exposure. Part of our tendency to latch onto reasons not to write has to do with that sense of exposure. These conditions of writing classes offer advantages as well, but the pandemic mainly reduced those advantages and raised the risks.

All the above came together to warrant using class time for only the most essential matters, and making the participation low-pressure and low-stakes. Had I been wise enough in time, I would have set all my classes as hybrid, since I knew I really hadn't yet sorted out this puzzle well enough to fill four hours of class time a week. Instead, basically I "punted," using a lot of class time as work time for the major assignments. This tactic probably sapped class attendance of a

lot of its energy and probably promoted more Zoom attendance (though from what I hear, my live attendance kept up decently well). But it did seem to keep students going all term long. So perhaps one small thing I learned is that "study hall" promotes retention. But there had to be more that we could do in class. I'll turn toward wondering what that could be.

Those who are not writing insiders might wonder what I'm fussing about. It's writing; teach them grammar, organization, thesis statements, and documentation. But we've found that all of that can be at best problematic. Extensive, long-repeated empirical evidence shows that teaching traditional grammar makes writing worse, not better. Organization turns out to be a complex and fluid concept, so that trying to "teach" any static forms for it locks people into becoming highly expert at fitting topics into Procrustean beds. Thesis statements are wonderful, but nobody ever invents a truly inspiring one without being highly expert on both the subject matter and the specific purposes for which people explore that subject matter. Ask for a thesis up front and students will give you topic sentences instead because that's as far as they've thought yet (and because it's all the ubiquitous five-paragraph essay ever asked of them in high school). Documentation makes no sense until writers genuinely think about engaging fellow researchers in a shared enterprise, which most first-year writers are years away from even imagining.

But writing insiders have not gotten much further than noting these negative lessons. After decades now of research into writing teaching, with burgeoning professional organizations, graduate programs, professional journals, and with an exponential gain in tenured full professors in the field, solid knowledge about teaching writing can be said quickly: quit teaching grammar; do some style exercises; teach writing as part of a process of subject-matter inquiry; have students talk about their written projects before they start writing them; offer models, rubrics, and conferences (but don't get your hopes too high for those); have writers revise genuinely, writing the same thing a very different way; and have students reflect on portfolios of their writing. And do respond to written work; something works better than nothing, even if all methods of response average out about the same (other than marking up all the grammar, worse than useless). In terms of settled, established, specific research results, that's about it.

We have inklings about a few other things, like perhaps teaching something about rhetoric, more likely teaching something about language and especially language perception (or "listening," as it has become named in the scholarship, even when we're talking about reading). But we have no clear knowledge that these efforts are worth the large amount of time they require, nor that we have highly effective ways to teach them as practical (as opposed to strictly theoretical) craft. I'll get back to rhetoric since it turns out to be a uniquely problematic issue, but first, let's set come background.

What else—and here thinking about things other than writing itself—should we do in a writing classroom? Nothing earth-shaking or solid here, but pandemic experience solidifies a few opinions.

Classes offer caring. We often talk about this as "community," but we need nothing so formal. Self-care can be difficult in challenging circumstances; it's easier when that burden of care is shared, at least to some extent. I sense that care mattered greatly in helping students keep going, even in awkwardly distanced, constantly partly Zoomed classes. Maybe discussions and such are "busy work," but perhaps we underestimate how being "busy" with others generates a sense of caring about them. Of course, a teacher might be able to provide enough caring even without a class; some students might need no more than a tutorial

with the right teacher. But the odds favor doing better with the care of a collection of fellow travelers, too. The pandemic has taught me that caring is essential—perhaps the most essential reason why we need schools at all. It also taught me that we can generate caring in a variety of ways that don't require physical presence; but physical presence makes it so much easier, and so much less prone to accidental mistakes in judgment.

Classes offer structure. When students got forced into AO classes, I saw more clearly than ever that a good plan does them a great deal of good. After all, they don't really know what they are getting into, or how to stage it, or how to pace it. Students who stayed with the plan did better and learned more. And classroom students did far better at that, even with less overt effort.

Classes offer discipline, but my already eroding sense of its priority crumbled further during the pandemic. In traumatizing circumstances, threats and punishments seemed entirely wrong. Now, having gone mostly without all that, I see a more direct connection between caring and structure that discipline rarely helps. Yes, if I could encourage more folks to stay with the plan, it would help. Discipline, it now seems clearer than ever, works intrinsically or not at all—something else the classroom manages somewhat by osmosis.

Class offers challenges, and that's a good thing. I've learned a lot about this part from my students, who in both Spring quarters had a course theme of "work" for their research-based writing. Many focused on the work of being a student, and many conducted primary research about that. From several of them, I heard that distance education permitted cheating—which students would do, but which reduced their interest in school and their general sense of well-being. To truly ground this finding, I'd need to do more rigorous research, but there was enough replication to suggest a very promising hypothesis. Students rarely cheat in class, it seems in large part because they don't want other students to see them as a cheater. In part that reluctance comes from intuitively understanding how challenges generate learning. It's something else students manage much better collectively, in each other's presence.

Finally, class should teach for transfer. We should care that students can make further use of whatever they gather from us. So class needs to support the key transfer-related attitudes and actions: having a growth mindset, believing in work and not in-born "talent" as the key to success; approaching tasks as a novice, ready to learn new things; nevertheless seeing continuity between earlier learning, present learning, and later learning; building conscious frameworks for transfer; having some agency in building those frameworks; and reflecting on the entire process.

But all of that has more to do with the nature of the work, not its content. What else should we *do* in a writing classroom? So far here at DU, I've stayed with the Program and spent a lot of time teaching about rhetoric and rhetorical analysis. After all, not only has rhetoric taken a featured place in our local objectives, it has become a large, integral part of the organized discipline of college writing teaching. Many, perhaps even most, first-year college writing programs have "rhetoric" in the title; the field has multiple journals and conferences with "rhetoric" in the title; most of us call the field itself either "Composition and Rhetoric" or "Rhetoric and Composition," familiarly shortened to "Comp-Rhet" or "Rhet-Comp."

Yet overwhelmingly, all but a few students learn rhetoric superficially, as thin theory, and apply it only accidentally, without truly seeing the connections. It works quite eerily like grammar: people who know grammar well can think with it productively, but we've found no way to teach most students how to do that; people who know rhetoric well can think with it productively, but we've found no way to teach most

students how to do that. Unlike grammar, rhetoric doesn't seem to do any harm, and for those few who latch onto it, it's great stuff. But if rhetoric truly has the primacy we give it as a discipline, we're probably failing in terms of genuinely teaching it for transfer. It could consume most of the time we have available in class, then, to do it better.

Indeed, in the most prominent work to date, Yancey, Robertson and Taczak have found that if we want students to learn rhetoric for transfer, we probably need to focus the entire course on rhetoric. Adding other subject-matter focuses reduces the transfer of rhetorical concepts. Their research does demonstrate that at least a few students, if they do transfer that knowledge, welcome it and use it. While these researchers (who I like, respect, and admire as much as any in the field) exercise sophisticated and appropriate caution about their claims, they do seem to ask us to double down on rhetoric. So, for years, I did. But seeing things through pandemic eyes accelerated my doubts about rhetoric as the best framework for teaching *writing itself*, the broader goal at the heart of it all.

I'll spare you the longer critique of a rhetoric-centered class, which would be suitable only for disciplinary insiders. But in a nutshell, the profession of composition teaching has given rhetoric its prime position for reasons other than its demonstrably productive impact on student writing, and perhaps we should be looking instead for more accessible keys to transfer more closely connected with the activity of *writing* itself.

One last peculiar thing about rhetoric connects with how we might want to think about the rest of writing. We find that when we give students work that has a genuine rhetorical situation—as in service learning and/or community-engaged learning—they readily apply rhetorical thinking with a skill that implies they already understood it at a more intuitive level. That is, again, rather like the case with grammar, all that rhetorical complexity seeks to describe from the outside highly complex thinking that students *already know how to do* intuitively. Just as they don't need to think about sentence diagrams to compose syntactically accurate writing, they don't need to think about Aristotle's dizzying webs of rhetorical categories to respond to them.

Of course, the pandemic took a wrecking ball to much of service and community-engaged learning, too. We learned one more thing here: to learn more about rhetoric and build its intuitive use, students need genuine rhetorical circumstances. Imaginary rhetorical situations can work better in less traumatic times, when we more freely exercise imagination, explore, and take risks. But especially when we're asking students to do highly complex work of other kinds, at a time when fear narrows our focus and shuts down our peripherals, it becomes too much to ask for too many to also build and sustain a fully realized sense of an imaginary rhetorical situation with useful novelty to explore and invent.

Thinking about the importance of imaginative work leads me to a grander conclusion. Everything about teaching rhetoric in a pandemic crystalized a thought toward which I've long been trending: above all, writing exercises intuition. More effective writers build a larger, better, more refined toolkit of intuitive abilities, of which rhetorical thinking, best used, is just one species. Writing is as described by the title of William Covino's marvelous small book: *The Art of Wondering*. As Covino explains, we make a great mistake when we ignore the outright guile of many great classical thinkers about rhetoric when they discuss rhetoric, a mistake that leads us to want to categorize and build expansive analytic systems rather than attend to the underlying message: effective communication applies largely intuitive abilities, so effective teaching largely needs to "teach" those. To understand rhetoric, as with most things about writing, students mainly need experiences with it that build their intuitive sense for it.

From that entire perspective, let's return to the pandemic-informed classroom—the one I wish I'd constructed ahead of time, informed by this principle: class time should build intuitive abilities, informed by simple keys that describe our main aims. Those aims should relate mainly to things people do while writing. Those aims can include rhetorical thinking, but only if we present genuine rhetorical situations; and there's so much else that we could do instead, or at least in the meantime, that I don't see genuine rhetorical situations as entirely necessary—even if clearly helpful. Meanwhile, the activities that develop any of our aims should be manageable but fresh—presenting challenge, but in a caring way.

Now abundant possibilities open up for what to do in class. For example, as perhaps my best lucky pandemic guess, I had WRIT 1122 students do "imagination warm-ups" at the start of class—something I'd done before in classes, but had slightly feared adding to the AO class. Based on the work of contrarian compositionist Ann Berthoff, I had students practice Berthoff's keys for thinking like highly effective writers: naming, opposing, classifying, and interpreting. I had my students use playful methods—for example, to practice naming, students invented, used, and explained their own new term for something related to our course focus. We did this in AO classes, so students shared and discussed results in an online discussion. That had a number of drawbacks compared to the interactive ways they work in class. Yet even in its clunkier distanced form, these warm-ups had the intended effect. I referred to them over and over again in responding to later work, and students, unprompted, reported using them at times when they thought about their writing. For instance, several mentioned keeping in mind that ambiguous pronouns above all fail to "name" something in ways readers can imagine. These students applied a more generally useful intuition about writing in a narrow circumstance in place of trying to memorize all the specific "rules."

Rather than try to catalog all the possible examples of work that develops writerly intuition, I want to return, at last, to "flow," and explain why I think that it's the most important key of all—or at least the one that I now wish I'd emphasized more during the pandemic. It's popular among comp-rhet folks to deride "flow" as an aspect of writing. We're fine (if at times cautiously) with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's psychological concept of flow as it applies to writing processes—aiming to develop approaches to writing that produce a "flow" state for the writer. But much like the equally maligned (and probably as unjustly) "clarity," we find many ways to argue that "flow" is a naïve concept, beloved by students for reasons we need to disrupt and complicate. And so for years I resisted including "flow' in my grading criteria and my comments, fishing around for other ways to describe the essential idea that writing needs to engage readers continuously in the moment and leave them, at the end, with a satisfied sense that the reading had value. Fortuitously, in the summer before the pandemic, I had finally given up; "flow" now appeared as a defined, key term in my grading criteria, at least. I figured that if students kept talking about it, it was because they had a felt sense that it mattered. So rather than ignore flow, I should help them try to make the concept more refined and sophisticated—supportive of stronger intuitions, then.

But I had not yet faced the full consequences of that decision, and then everything blew up. I had a conception of flow, I had suggestions for flow, I commented and graded on flow. But unlike with naming, opposing, classifying and interpreting, I had no activities that focused specifically on building it.

It wasn't a complete disaster. I also wanted to offer students varied genres, so they accidentally practiced the different approaches to flow available in each. I was

already openly set against the flow-destroying quality of the five paragraph essay (after all, mere sorting isn't much of a mental operation). At least my students had attempted flow in new ways.

Yet the results steadily disappointed us all. For some reason, in every genre most kept trying to return to mere sorting. In literature reviews, despite the encouragements to synthesize and to bring sources into contact with each other, most basically wrote narrative annotated bibliographies, trudging through source by source—even if often finding clever transitional connections from one to the next, at least showing awareness of the flow that might have been. In IMR&D format (Introduction, Methods, Results & Discussion), for many each of the last three section dutifully reported things method by method, failing to make connections among the findings themselves except in brief moments of discovery. Students enjoyed discovering things about research, about their topics, and even about other aspects of writing. But real flow, really hooking readers and not letting them go until we'd all gotten somewhere exciting and new, went not just unfulfilled but mostly unpracticed. And so, when my WRIT 1133 students wrote their final portfolios, commenting on the required three earlier included works, I got what I suspected I would get: discussions organized as a collection of topical lumps, each of the three pieces in turn, and not by real flow—not a journey through the ideas about writing that the included pieces should simply have exemplified in varied ways.

I'd failed to see the obvious answer in time: consumed with all the novel logistics of a pandemic class, I too had fallen back on old tricks. I had tried to use overt explanations, not intuition-building activities, to build a sense of flow. I had focused too much on the destination, the assignments themselves and their larger aims, and not enough on the journey. The kinds of activities I'm now considering would have fit all the other requirements for pandemic teaching discussed as preamble to finally getting here.

As Richard Haswell explained in considerable detail (254), flow (though as a good disciplinary citizen he did not use that word) tends to work in a classifiable set of ways, so we could practice those ways. One way we've already seen, and it's the best transition from mere sorting to real thinking: classification. That is, rather than just lump together three things taken from a grab-bag of possibilities, we can do as Caesar actually did—dividing all Gaul into all its parts, transitioning according to the reasons for the divisions and enticing readers with a vision of better understanding the whole. Another is cause and effect, particularly if chained, so that each new effect becomes a cause for what comes next. Now, at this point, experienced comp-rhet insiders have already perked up their ears and thought, "Isn't that 'Modes'? Is he really going to pitch 'modes,' those stale old assignment sequences for writing a classification paper, then a narration paper, then a cause-effect paper, etc.?" Well, first, I do find myself wondering whether that "stale" approach might have had something to it relative to other things we do instead. But, no. I don't mean "papers" defined by these modes. I mean short, playful exercises. Critics of the "modes" rightly argue that these aspects of writing never define any real piece of writing as a whole; they're just tools, to pick up and use as wanted. They're vital tools, though; we should be offering them in some form, just cut down to size so that they, too, can be seen as a classification—a complete set of ways to generate flow.

But really, we don't have to go back to the entire list of "modes," some of which relate more to shifts in purpose and genre than to methods for flow. We can stick with those that focus on ways of ordering discussion. And, really, narration, classification, and chained causation are probably enough—probably a useful first-level classification, within which all the other forms could be grouped. My growing sense

that an intuition for flow matters enormously leads me to think I need to develop a host of different ways to practice flow, which will work best as classroom exercises with collaborative components. Ultimately, we want writers to think of flow, too, as an intuitive art—not so much a matter of various kinds of "outlines," but rather just a way of attending to reader engagement and offering a sense of closure.

Two related thoughts come to mind about the flow-centric classroom I'm starting to imagine. First, I've also often used style exercises in my classes, something I find always worth expanding (and not just because we have abundant empirical research saying it helps). But now I start thinking of style, too, in terms of flow, and I start thinking that what I've really been after is readability—not just in the narrow sense of well-ordered sentences, but in the sense of pleasing language, language that creates a readerly flow because we want more of it. The clarity and appeal of sentences both matter. I'm pretty sure I'll be re-framing style in that way, both in exercises and in comments on student work. Second, genre keeps occurring to me as the part of rhetoric that does the most good, such that I've long aimed to give students experience with varieties of genre. But now, in ways I've really just started to imagine, I'm hypothesizing that we can approach genre, too, as a subcategory of flow. Here's how experts in this kind of writing make it flow for readers. Here's why what they do helps the writing flow. At a meta-level, here is a way to use your familiarity with analyzing the texts themselves, but a way that open up onto the rest of the rhetorical situation. Most likely flow will lead to rhetorical thinking better than thinking about rhetoric leads to flow, in major part because flow proceeds from an intuitive perspective while rhetoric as we teach it, bless Aristotle's heart, proceeds from an analytical perspective.

I'm starting to think it's always all been about flow, all along. I'm even wondering about whether flow can restore rhetoric as an intuitive craft—something about rhetoric that Covino tried to tell us overtly and that Berthoff assumed smart people would figure out for themselves. I confess at last that I've been somewhat adventurously playing with flow in this piece, too, trying out the argument on myself—and my readers. Here's hoping that it's worked, at least well enough.

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