

SUMMER 2021 RETREAT REFLECTION

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I don't know what to write. Perhaps there's no better summation of my experience teaching writing in 2020 and 2021 – a long string of moments when I didn't know what to write, and I found myself writing anyway. So, let's start at the beginning and go from there.

PRE-AUTUMN 2020: SHIFTED PRIORITIES

Before I get to Autumn Quarter, let me go back to Spring 2020, when the big shift happened.

Once lockdowns started, I made a list of teaching priorities. Up to that time, my courses had involved performative lectures, in-class activities, F2F workshoping, and in-person conferences. F2F teaching has always been my preferred modality, even for peer review.¹ Obviously, many of those teaching elements had to be revised for lockdown pedagogy. However, while I prepared myself for big changes, I also took stock of those teaching elements that I wanted to retain no matter what.

The foremost element I wanted to retain was my approach to conferencing. I firmly believe that providing feedback to students via one-on-one conferences comes with many advantages:

- ⊗ Students see me react to their work in real-time, and they can offer insights about their process.
- ⊗ Students have the opportunity to ask me questions so that my comments are productive.
- ⊗ I have the opportunity to help students brainstorm and make sense of peer feedback.
- ⊗ I have the opportunity to help students create revision priorities through dialogue.
- ⊗ I have the opportunity to model the delivery of real-time feedback to students.

So, I decided to continue conferencing, even if it meant going asynchronous in other ways in order to keep Zoom-weary students from burning out.

The other element I wanted to retain was my insistence upon teaching self-care. I have always begun my courses by leveling with students about common vulnerabilities (stress, lack of sleep, emotional instability, etc.) because I want them to acknowledge those vulnerabilities and take steps to manage them in healthy ways. So, for Spring 2020, I scaled back my courses under the assumption that students would be experiencing novel anxieties while also having to juggle multiple Zoom courses they never truly signed up for.² Additionally, I made a point of conferencing with students individually every three weeks, using some of that time to ask about their situations (but also insisting that students need not share more than they wanted).

AUTUMN 2020: FSEM & WRIT-1533

Autumn 2020 marked my first foray into hybrid teaching. It also marked my first time teaching WRIT-1533, a section of "Writing & Research" reserved for transfer students.³

Briefly, let me mention my FSEM. Teaching a course about board games is incredibly hard when students can't share a table or touch the same objects. However, in the weeks before Autumn Quarter started, I had a remarkable conversation with my friend Dan Singer, who advised me to see it as an opportunity for innovation that students could participate in. This comment prompted me to dig deeper into the history of tabletop games, at which point I realized that great games have often emerged as a productive response to traumatic moments in history (air raids, epidemics, financial collapse, etc.). I therefore recalibrated my FSEM so that students would be not just designing games but innovating on them; to that end, I required students to purchase a kit of gaming pieces called *The White Box* so that each student would have the same set of materials as everyone else, allowing them to replicate games even across classroom distances (or Zoom).

As for WRIT-1533, I decided to replicate as much of my WRIT-1133 (including my odyssey essay assignment) as I could while still integrating April's materials for transfer mentorship. The course was

been more positive about peer feedback since I started peer conferences.

² Not to mention the fact that many professors required additional homework in lieu of classroom time.

³ I am deeply grateful to my friend and colleague April-Chapman Ludwig for this opportunity, and for her mentorship.

¹ I have done online, hybrid, and in-person peer reviews over the years. In that time, I have found that my students tend to be more engaged in genuine conversation when they read and comment on each other's work in real-time pairs. Admittedly, I'm biased toward F2F teaching in general, but students have

hybrid, so we met as a class on Mondays and then completed an asynchronous lesson later in the week. This meant that I had far less F2F time with students than I would have liked. Nonetheless, I made a point of conferencing with each student every three weeks via Zoom, and this change in modality was a godsend. Part of me still misses the F2F interaction, but conferencing over Zoom has had multiple advantages:

- ☒ The lack of a morning commute is more convenient than I expected.
- ☒ Screen-sharing makes it easier for me to read a paper with a student in real time.
- ☒ The Record option makes it easier for my students to keep a copy of my feedback.
- ☒ The Record option also makes it easier to produce evidence of my conferences.

I will most likely continue conferencing via Zoom from now on.

One of the challenges of my first WRIT-1533 was community-building. Normally, transfer students in this course go on field trips and archive visits in order to learn more about research and connect with each other outside of a classroom setting. In this way, the course is meant to replicate the FSEM experience that transfer students do not receive. However, the pandemic compromised many of these activities; furthermore, students were not as invested in crafting alternative activities as we had hoped. I am left wondering if a fully in-person class would have evolved differently, but that is pure speculation on my part.

WINTER 2021: WRIT-1122/1622

Winter 2021 was a bit more familiar for me. By this time, I had mostly acclimated to teaching a fully in-person (and, by necessity, hybrid) course in compliance with campus safety protocols. As a result, I carried over many of my materials from the previous Winter – with one exception. In the previous Winter, my second major assignment (of three) was an exigence analysis, for which I asked students to select an issue relevant to one of their Discourses and break it down into its constituent arguments. However, I have found that students often have trouble differentiating an exigence analysis from an exigence-based argument, so I decided to try something else.

Since my course has always been about questioning the definition of “argument,” I crafted a new assignment called a “rhetorical theory.” For this assignment, students had to write an argument about “argument”; in other words, they had to define “argument” as a concept. What is it? What is its purpose? What are its components? While crafting a theory, they also had to cite preexisting theories (readings from Will Covino, Doug Downs, Cindy Griffin, Vershawn Ashanti Young, and others) as well as analyze an example illustrating their theory. This assignment resulted in some fascinating definitional arguments. One student analyzed an interpretive dance as a form of rhetorical action; another analyzed emotional appeals in *Animal Crossing* as manipulation; another analyzed a jazz song from the civil rights era as making an argument through its melody.⁴ Ultimately, I found the assignment to be a promising one, but perhaps one better reserved for a Writing Minors course.

One moment from Winter that has stuck with me occurred during midterm season. One day, after class, a student approached me and commented that she very much appreciated my teaching style, and several other students agreed with her opinion. I was sincerely flattered, but also puzzled. At the time, I was considering changing my teaching style to something less lecture-based, but now I was questioning why my lecture-style seemed to resonate.⁵ Shortly thereafter, John Tiedemann began an email chain in which he talked about BreadTubers – YouTubers who create entertaining video essays centering around topics like QAnon, gender, and persuasion. I have long enjoyed video essays by BreadTubers, and I began to realize that my lecture-style is heavily influenced by the performative model that these content creators use when explaining difficult concepts.

Could it be that my lecture-style resonated with those students because they grew up watching video essays on YouTube? I honestly don’t know, but it’s something I will be reflecting on over the next year.

SPRING 2021: WRIT-1133/1633

By the time Spring 2021 arrived, I could tell that my students were exhausted. Even from the second week, they were already offering comments in class (and in

⁴ Admittedly, some definitional arguments were lackluster, but I was expecting a range of responses.

⁵ Personally, I think that there are many rhetorics of lecture, and some are more pedagogically productive than others.

private) about how much they simply wanted to move on from classes and quarter systems. I was not surprised, given the extraordinary circumstances, but it did make teaching self-care a bit more complicated.

As with Winter, my Spring courses largely replicated what I had done in the previous Spring. However, I adjusted my Odyssey Essay assignment so that it now featured a “side quest” option. One of the lessons I learned from Spring 2020 was that students often conduct research that they can’t use, but they feel compelled to shoehorn it into their projects because they do not want to be penalize for lacking information. In Spring 2020, I made an informal rule that students could opt to exclude their qualitative research from their odyssey essays as long as they provided documentary proof that they had conducted qualitative research.

For Spring 2021, I formalized this rule into my assignment. Now, students could conduct qualitative research on any topic, even if they did not ultimately use that research in their final essay. All I asked was that they provide clear and documented evidence of their research. This proved to be a good decision, in my opinion:

- ☒ It gave students more options for research. Students could now write their odyssey essays about any topic of interest without worrying about how to “fit” qualitative research into it...unless they wanted to.
- ☒ It gave students room to explore unrelated interests with qualitative research so they would not get bored or overwhelmed by their quarter-long research agenda.
- ☒ It helped students realize that research-writing is as much about what you leave out as what you put in, a valuable lesson for any research-writing course.

In the future, I plan to continue with this “side quest” strategy.

One other change I made to my Spring courses was the inclusion of several primary research activities used by other colleagues. I have long worried about the amount of time I spend on text-based research in my writing courses, so I wanted to incorporate more primary research methods through fun activities rather than lecture. (Again, I’ve been thinking about changing my lecture-style.) So, I asked my students to complete a photo tour of campus and a stories-from-the-archive activity (both created by Rob Gilmor) in order to learn more about primary research methods.

Looking back, these activities were some of the highlights of my courses, and I am deeply grateful to Rob and others for allowing me to use their materials in order to improve my teaching.

There’s more I could say here, but I think I’ll leave it at that for now. Even with all these words in front of me, I still feel like I don’t know what to write. But I promise, I’ll keep writing.