

In these unprecedented times...

I have a very short tolerance for sports TV. The announcers' penchant for pathos and hyperbole drive me to boredom and more often aggravation. Every game can't be the most important game that's ever happened. Statistics with so many caveats they mean nearly nothing need not be stated at all. Plus, it is the one and only time I still encounter tv commercials aimed at the general public—a very old fashioned concept in 2021. I'm a millennial. I want my ads targeted.

So, stuck at home with my baseball-deprived husband for a year, I made a game of it. Nearly every tv ad starts with a sanguine "In these unprecedented times..." or "Now more than ever..." making lofty claims about the (as yet unknown) impacts of a once-in-a-century global pandemic. I sit on the couch or stroll through the living room guessing loudly at what I think they might be advertising: "Toilet paper! Pickup trucks! Lysol wipes! Power tools!" I shout. My husband knows my game and laughs along half-heartedly, hoping I'll leave the room and take my editorializing with me before the actual game comes back from commercial.

So now I attempt to do the very same thing I mock Charmin, Chevy, Lysol, and Craftsman for. I'll naively take stock of what the last fifteen months have meant to me and to my students, relying largely on cliches and knowing that everyone else is doing the same. But hey, gotta sell toilet paper while we can, right?

Like most professors, in the 2020-2021 academic year I faced the scariest and most challenging moments so far in my teaching career. In addition to navigating the mental-emotional minefield of teaching in-person during a pandemic, I also revised my two required first-year writing courses (WRIT

1122 and WRIT 1133) to a hybrid format, as well as adapting my WRIT 1122 to a four-week online format for a Summer 2021 section of the course. I also taught an online asynchronous version of my WRIT 1133 course, but after the Spring 2020 quarter and several years of online teaching in the summer, this was old hat. Adapting to hybrid and online formats meant condensing my interactions with students while attempting to maintain academic rigor and ample student support. These revisions to my teaching were anchored by my overall goals to support students as whole people (not just students in my class), to help them enjoy writing and see its usefulness for learning and communication, and to encourage them to pursue topics that matter (including social justice topics) in their research and writing.

FSEM 1111: Fall 2020

Fall 2020 was my third time teaching my FSEM course with the theme of "Social Class and College Culture," and I truly love this theme and the opportunities for mentorship and relationship building that FSEM allows. However, I taught this class in-person twice weekly on campus during the heights of the pandemic. It was terrifying. Even as I was doing the normal teaching work of lecturing or facilitating class discussions, I fought a constant inner monologue that convinced me my students and I were all getting covid, we would be on the news, someone would go to the hospital, someone would die. I would come home from teaching each day and be so drenched in anxiety sweat that I had to shower immediately. I got nasal tested weekly and sometimes more than weekly if a student notified me they had a possible exposure to covid. It was not normal, and it was too much for the university to ask of faculty and students.

Despite this existential dread and trauma, I knew the important role the class was playing

in students' lives and college experiences. For many of my students, this FSEM class was their only in-person class and one of their few opportunities to break from the intense isolation they experienced living in the dorms or at home with family. This class was their only glimpse of the typical college experience they had hoped for. This was their only chance to make friends with their new classmates and chat about mundane (but highly impactful) topics like how bad the dining hall food is, where to do their laundry, which clubs or orgs were still operating in-person or virtually, what music everyone was listening to. So, I did my best to organize small group and paired activities (while maintaining mask wearing and six feet of physical distance) and let students chat too long about those mundane topics that reached outside the immediate scope of our course.

These efforts to build a somewhat normal in-person experience were, of course, complicated by several students' need to attend the class virtually. So, like most professors this year, I was teaching a de facto hybrid, hyflex course. Each day, a couple students would attend class on Zoom, and the rest of us would be in the physical classroom together. I felt grateful to have taught several online classes before this and to have come to the class equipped with some collaborative, online activities we could adapt to our new hybrid, hyflex modality. In week 6 we read several articles analyzing party culture in college. As a way in to discussing these issues, I facilitated an activity wherein students worked in small groups, using a combination of Zoom and Canvas, to identify, share, and describe depictions of party culture they had seen in popular media. Collaboratively, students posted links, images, or video clips of the media they had found together and wrote a couple paragraphs connecting those popular media examples to our course readings. Normally, this activity might have been a

straightforward discussion, but in our new hyflex modality, we were better able to archive and share students' work using familiar digital tools and platforms.

As we navigated new hyflex terrain together, I was immensely grateful to students for the energy and enthusiasm they brought to the class. This enthusiasm shone through especially in their assignments for the course including weekly reflections and final video compositions. One student, in her reflection 5 assignment for the course, described her experience learning about social class in both FSEM and her Criminology course. She used quantitative data from readings from the two courses to compare their approach to analyzing social class and its influence on education (FSEM) and crime rates (criminology). Based on her learning in the two courses, the student concludes "When looking at these graphs together we can conclude that as education increases poverty decreases which also causes homicide (crime) to decrease. Therefore, by making education more accessible, we can drive down crime rates." I was heartened by these and other connections students made between their disparate learning contexts across campus and across modalities.

Another student, in her reflection 3 for the course, comments on her identity as a first-generation American citizen and how her Ethiopian-American identity has influenced her pathway to college and her choice of a Biology major. She eventually revised and expanded this reflection for her video composition assignment, the result of which is a compelling multimodal project that follows the student from childhood through college to her plans for her future career as a medical doctor. She talks about her desire to live and work in both Ethiopia and the U.S., treating impoverished populations and inspiring Ethiopian and Ethiopian-American children

to give back to their communities. She says, “This is what inspired me to become a biology major, because if someone is going to make a difference, why can’t it start with me?” With these and other projects in the course, my students provided me a brief respite from the cynicism of the global pandemic, restating the importance of a college education as they see it.

Overall, I would call this class a success because, first and foremost, we all lived through it. Secondly, I think the class did its job in terms of providing students a lifeline to the typical college experience they so desire and can hope for in the coming years. I was heartened by students’ comments in course evaluations as well as their final portfolio reflections that stated the value of the class even amidst pandemic chaos. In course evaluations, students commented “This course had meaningful lessons and great information that I will carry with me through college. I feel more well-rounded and ready to think more critically,” “Aubrey was always there to answer all of our questions and she constantly held advising meetings to make sure we were okay,” “She was easy to talk to and very truly cared for her class.” Throughout what was probably the worst possible quarter to start your college career, these students found solace, support, and encouragement in our time together, and for that I was truly proud.

WRIT 1122: Winter 2021, Summer 2021

In Winter 2021, I adapted my WRIT 1122 “Rhetoric and Academic Writing About Fandom” to a hybrid course with weekly in-person meetings and all other work conducted asynchronously online using Canvas. Some of the existential dread about working with students in-person had receded with time and habit and some was alleviated by only meeting in-person weekly. Weekly in-person classes allowed me time to get precautionary weekly

nasal tests in between teaching sessions and to feel some sense of mental-emotional ease that I was not getting or giving covid in the classroom. Once more, the course was effectively hyflex with students attending on Zoom as needed, and we never had a single class period across my three sections with every student attending in-person, someone was always on Zoom. Again, I was grateful to have a cache of online teaching strategies that could be easily adapted to this de facto hyflex modality. Additionally, the theme of fandom lends itself well to online collaboration since we are often already online in the classroom looking at fan art or fan vids or blogs about recent pop culture.

Once again, I’ll turn to students’ projects as evidence of a successful class. In a course about fandom, it would be easy to stagnate their writing in the realm of vapid (or worse) pop culture minutiae. But, once again, students chose to write about topics that matter, about representation and politics, about how media and fandom can effect our broader social commitments. Several students, in their “Current Events in Fandom” projects, took on the issue of J.K. Rowling’s repeatedly transphobic public statements and Tweets, a risky and important topic to write about in a course where the professor declared herself a Harry Potter superfan on the first day of class. In their essays and presentations, these students lead the class in important discussions of queer representation as well as the broader question of whether we can separate the art from the artist or if and how we can enjoy art when the world is full of terrible people who sometimes make that art. Interestingly, students often sided with the large contingent of HP fans who declare that the Harry Potter universe has no author anymore, it belongs to the fans now. And we heeded the ethical position of students who argued in earnest that the best thing to do was no longer consume any media that monetarily

benefit J.K. herself; spend your money on prolific fanart and leave canon behind. These debates show students' willingness to take on meaningful topics as well as their savvy analyses of complex rhetorical situations.

WRIT 1133: Winter 2021, Spring 2021

By Spring 2021, I was fully vaccinated and much more at ease about teaching in-person. I even worked up the courage to sip an iced coffee (through a straw, wearing a mask) while teaching my three hybrid sections of WRIT 1133. Teaching my WRIT 1133 in a hybrid format helped me to realize just how fast-paced and overpacked the course had been in past quarters. I usually teach an assignment sequence of six major assignments: 1) annotated bibliography 2) interview report 3) survey report 4) argumentative research paper 5) open letter 6) final portfolio. Around week seven of Spring 2021, students were super overwhelmed, and so was I. After several emails from concerned students seeking extensions or other support to help manage the workload of the course, I decided to cut the open letter assignment. In future iterations of the course, I think I will even cut the argumentative research paper and add in a policy brief instead. I have several reasons for wanting to switch up this assignment sequence, reasons that the 2020-2021 academic year made more concrete.

Firstly, I worry that teaching an "argumentative research paper" disconnects my WRIT 1133 course from any real world exigencies and perpetuates the mutt genre or worse the school-based genre. Though our course goals invoke the "academic audience," I wonder: how might we keep those audiences in mind while teaching outside the confines of school genres like the research paper or the argumentative essay? Additionally, I worry about the ethics that teaching argumentation entails; how does an argument-counterargument-rebuttal structure contribute

to the increasing political polarization and communicative violence that dominates our national stage? What other (more productive, more ethically informed) genres can I teach?

I am hoping that integrating a policy brief into future iterations of WRIT 1133, as several of my colleagues have already done, will allow for students to develop audience awareness and provide evidence in support of their claims without relying necessarily on argumentation for argumentation's sake. Additionally, a policy brief fits well into the "Research and Writing About Food" course theme I have designed for WRIT 1133; several students already make recommendations for possible solutions or ways forward to redress the food-related topics they write about such as food deserts, food insecurity, GMOs, industrialized agriculture, dairy alternatives; a policy brief would help students to center these solutions or ways forward and write towards a targeted audience with specific exigencies in mind. Finally, I had the privilege of working with a student for WRIT Large this past year who had written an impressive policy brief in Casey Roundtree's WRIT 1133 course, so I know I have strong examples of past students' projects as well as knowledgeable colleagues to collaborate with while I revise my course with this new assignment sequence.

I also have some practical motivations for wanting to collapse and replace assignments in WRIT 1133. I'd like to teach less assignments overall in the course. Six assignments in ten weeks is far too much even as I look forward to an in-person format and twenty class meetings. I felt so rushed in Winter and Spring 2021, like students were struggling with writing issues that I knew how to coach them through but didn't have the time or the energy to do so. By teaching fewer assignments I hope to also do less grading and more coaching in future iterations of WRIT

1133. Especially with limited class time with students these past quarters, my job felt like it mostly consisted of grading; instead, I'd like to return to what I know works best in a writing course: guiding students through processes and strategies they can adapt to help them learn in any writing situation.

As my ruminations on assignment sequence, grading, and student support show, Spring 2021 brought a return to the familiar. Like most teachers, I oscillate back and forth—I want to stick to my tried and true lessons but also feel the pull to experiment with new interventions in the classroom. Now more than ever, we rely on clichés to cope, and I'll do the same. It was hard. We did it anyway. What can we learn from it? How can we never do it again?