

## Building Community and Promoting Underlife in Asynchronous Online Classes

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In fall 2020, I submitted a proposal for an Innovation Grant that focused on creating or modifying assignments that build and foster community in online classes. Because I taught asynchronous online classes in both the winter and spring quarters, I was particularly keen to explore ways in which I could create community spaces with a group of students who may have never met before.

One of the things I missed the most about the in-person classroom was its underlife. Robert Brooke first applied the sociological concept of “underlife” to the writing classroom in 1987, long before the advent of online learning. In his conception, “underlife” is all the things we do, both as teachers and students, to stand outside or question our classroom roles (141). For example, students may share personal information about their lives during a class discussion in order to challenge their role as “just students,” and teachers may design class activities that urge students to see themselves as writers or creators, rather than “just students.”

If you’ve ever felt like your online students, while still interesting and thoughtful and charming and dynamic in one-on-one interactions, become zombie robots when asked to interact with other students, you may have felt the lack of visible underlife. Teachers

and scholars of writing (such as Charles Moran and Richard Lanham, among others) have long been aware of, and concerned with, the importance of underlife in the digital classroom. Though he’s speaking mostly to the use of computers in in-person classes, Derek Mueller’s 2009 *Computers and Composition* article builds a strong argument that teachers should see digital underlife as productive and intrinsic to curricula, rather than a distraction from it.

When the educational world moved online during the COVID pandemic, this topic weighed heavily on my mind. I have taught online classes for years, though usually only one or two per year, and I knew from experience that the more “open space” I gave students to interact, the more engaged with my classes they seemed to be. For example, I had developed the practice of giving students a writing prompt once a week that was entirely unrelated to the work of the course. These short assignments, graded on completion, asked students to engage with one another through discussion posts on prompts ranging from “what are the qualities that make your best friend amazing?” to “if you were to write a book, what would it be about?” to “what’s the most important item you own?” Students engaged readily with these prompts, often writing more than the suggested word count and replying to more of their peers’ posts than required. On course evaluations, they often cite these small assignments as integral to their sense of belonging in our class.

However, with the knowledge that my students would spend most of their academic time this past year sitting by themselves in their dorm rooms, staring at a screen, I wanted to do so much more, which is where my grant proposal came from. Along with my colleagues Sarah Hart Micke and Rob Gilmour, I developed a set of new or modified assignments to use in my

asynchronous classes to try to achieve the following goals:

- Create opportunities for genuine connection among students and faculty, connections that can foster everyone’s mental health.
- Reproduce or approximate the qualities of teaching and learning that are hard to quantify and articulate, but which make up important aspects of our professional lives and our students’ intellectual growth.
- Create sustainability in teaching and learning in online/hybrid settings by exploring ways to mitigate burnout, quarantine fatigue, work overload, and anxiety through creating “systems of community” in our writing classes.
- Emphasize the social aspects of writing by encouraging students to discuss and engage in process work--brainstorming, research, planning, etc.--prior to drafting or as an ongoing focus of course and peer review work.

Based on these goals, I implemented a central assignment in my online courses that I called “Writing Pods.” In in-person classes, I often have students meet with me in my office in small groups - we discuss drafts, ask questions, and generally practice what it looks like for writers to engage with other writers about writing. The Writing Pods, as I argued in my grant materials, are a similar support system for the entire essay-writing process, from brainstorming to post-submission reflection. This Writing Pod structure allows for student contact and relationship building without requiring significant additional time from the instructor, and also gives them an authority-free space with which to engage with one another, fostering and promoting their underlife.

These Pods, usually made up of four students, met roughly once a week via Zoom in both my WRIT 1122 and WRIT 1133 classes. They were given various tasks, from more formal

peer review to informal “check ins.” In the first meeting of the quarter, each Pod developed their own charter for working together. These charters laid out both the principles and the logistics for meetings, and served to orient students toward a shared articulation of purpose. At the end of the quarter, each Pod reflected back on what they’d learned through the Pod structure.

Though I haven’t received course evaluations from my spring WRIT 1133 classes yet, the feedback from my winter WRIT 1122 students was uniformly positive. Below is a sample of the comments students made about the Writing Pod assignment (emphases mine):

- “The writing pods were extremely useful for this course. It offered all of us an honest source of feedback and gave me the **opportunity to make some new friends.**”
- “I really enjoyed the writing groups for this class. With everything going on, it has been challenging to meet people, and by having the writing pods we are able to **get close with some of our classmates**, something I’ve really enjoyed.”
- “The pods are a great resource to connect to fellow students in your class, and to get different viewpoints on your work and on assignments, it also gives the class **a sense of community!**”
- “I thought that our pod groups were so helpful and fun at times. The **people that I got placed with were super fun.**”
- “The pod provided us with **a connection to the class** making it feel more like a real class and not just random assignments.”
- “The writing pods were amazing. I loved them. I really enjoyed working with my team. They gave me a lot of important feedback and I value their opinions. **I made good friends in this class.**”

- “I was skeptical about the asynchronous writing class but was pleasantly surprised. I really enjoyed the small group meetings as **a way to connect with peers** and I had a lot of fun this quarter.”

This repeated emphasis on community, connection, friendship, and fun (which I think is a more complex and important term for our students than it might seem on its face) is a demonstration of the ways in which the Writing Pod assignment fosters student underlife; they’re not expressing how their “student” skills improved, they’re privileging the fact that they are social creatures who value the interactions they have with one another.

In a similar vein, students also frequently reported that their class work benefited from this adjacent social opportunity. When I asked the groups to collectively reflect on their Pod experiences, they shared the ways in which the Pods allowed them to learn more and perform better in class:

- “We benefited from becoming better communicators and team members, we actively helped each other.”
- “We learned it is important to be an active listener and contributor. Being an active contributor and listener encourages you to be engaged and prepared.”
- “Being a part of a group even if its not technically groupwork greatly improves your motivation and willingness to learn.” [sic]
- “We bounced ideas off of one another which made a positive impact on our writing.”
- “We each brought different thoughts, opinions, and ideas to the group which helped us not only understand each other but our work in this course as well.”

- “We held each other accountable and supported each other, especially around group projects.”
- “We prompted each other with questions and supported one another with our writing processes and ideas.”

Coming to this conclusion on their own (writing is a social activity) means they’re more likely to have internalized it. If I’d just said to them, “Writing is a social activity!” but they felt as though they were drifting, alone and silent, in the deep, dark reaches of Canvas, I doubt this important truth would have made an impact on them.

As a teacher, knowing my students are meeting without me and still being productive in our class ( for accountability, they were required to turn in short “Pod Reports” after each meeting) gave me an approximation of that feeling I get when I walk into my classroom a few minutes early and I hear the low sound of my students talking: the hum and buzz and occasional laughter that isn’t an outsider to the class, but rather the vital underlife that makes the class relevant to their lives and learning.