

Teaching Reflection 2021

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Intro

Dawn breaths light on a new day offering hope where yesterday mighta slammed it shut. I like to think of the beginning of school year starting off this way – all fresh and optimistic with much to offer both me and students.

And this is how the 2020-2021 academic year began before reality started to slither her way beneath the surface mucking things up: it was a difficult year to put it mildly. I've always prided myself on being able to find a sliver of silver lining – even last year when we went on lockdown, I wrote about how I survived, and I was never really stressed – and being able to be creative and responsive for/to the students, this year I've been trampled on so many in ways I'm still trying to process.

Years ago, I was sitting in the audience listening to Linda Adler-Kassner give a presentation on threshold concepts, and she said that one common college threshold concept was the ability to be comfortable with being uncomfortable – this is when learning can really truly happen. I have never forgotten that. I've applied that to myself even with teaching, can I be comfortable enough with things that make me uncomfortable so I can help my students? Often this means being vulnerable and opening myself up in ways where I share things so that students see it's

ok to share of themselves, too. This can be scary, and if I'm being honest, difficult because of the different types of methods, practices, and platforms I've used to help students engage with and attempt to be vulnerable. A lot of times these methods, practices, and platforms work and have been incredibly successful (and I have published about them), but they aren't always, and I don't think, as a field, we are always open and truthful about the moments that aren't successful or that are perhaps harmful to us as teachers, the ones that make us question ourselves, our methods, and even why we became educators. We learn from successes – and those are the ones we read and hear the most about – but we learn more from the things that don't work, for one reason or another, and those are the ones that don't get talked or written about. For the purposes of this reflection, I am going to focus on what I tried this past year in my classes – a year not quite like any other year where expectations mingled with uncertainties and fears of what tomorrow might bring.

Social Media: Social Expectations and How it's used in the Writing Classroom

Social media is literally all around us – our students come to us almost always (I say almost always because there can be a small percentage that do not have social media) engaging with some form of it. From Tik Tok to Instagram, students use it as a primary mode of communication, a method of receiving news, a way to figure out trends (in any number of topics), and much more. I've had students share they want to be Insta-famous referring to having enough followers to make a profit where brands send you products to promote, and I've had students who were semi-Tik Tok famous where their videos have gone viral and received hundreds of thousands of likes. Social media, any of the platforms, offers them an online space to share and share widely and broadly, but it's also a highlight reel allowing students – and people in general -- to post a “fake” or unreal

side or even just one side of themselves setting up unrealistic expectations of what is “real” or “authentic.” For example, people who are Insta-“famous” can offer advice and/or tutorials without any true expertise or even experience, but given the amount of followers they have can be taken at being as *expert*. And so then their followers believe what they are saying to be the Truth (emphasis on big “T” truth). And people follow them because they show this side of themselves, this “vulnerable” side. It makes them appear even more real, more authentic ... at least from the highlight reel that they show.

Social media has also become an easy way to troll – to hide behind what’s perceived as an invisible wall. Trolling has almost become an artform where people seek out others to troll. Other times people troll because they don’t like what someone else is saying/doing/acting/believing/etc./etc. This has become painfully truer in the last several years. It’s easy to trash talk someone online when it’s accessible and easily done and can be seen as valuable to others in the audience (those who may agree with the troll). So, trolls can be celebrated and thus continue to do what they do – creating anxiety and bringing hostility in a space that can already be somewhat volatile.

Thus, social media tends to create a false narrative, one richly woven with expectations of how to look, act, respond – the person you want to project not the person you necessarily really might be. It also brings with it a varied history. Research – from various different educational viewpoints -- suggests the jury is still out on whether it’s an effective tool for classroom practice, but it has been studied in the writing classroom for some time, and I, myself, have been an advocate for it. I started using blogs in my classroom 7-8 years ago, including Tumblr, and then I started using Twitter as a practice in my first year research

classroom before using it in other ways. Since COVID, I have also used Instagram.

Some might wonder with what I’ve mentioned above why I’ve used it in my classroom (and for so long), and it’s really kinda of simple: we continue to see shifts in higher ed in terms of expectations, values, and what employers want, so when AAC&U released some the research supporting this in 2016, I made changes in my pedagogy and classroom practices in attempt to teaching students to be critical, innovative thinkers able to respond to the pressing problems found within their communities. This often begins by engaging students in activities that disrupt their notion of learning to try and trigger meaningful and transferrable knowledge and practices. Using social media in a writing classroom tends to disrupt how and what students believe learning should be which can encourage successful transfer – it also teaches them about writing for a public space while creating a discourse knowledge community. So, this is why I started using social media, and in the past I’ve had great success with using social media *and* students have loved using it in my classroom – course evaluations have confirmed their enjoyment while research I’ve conducted on my Teaching for Transfer curriculum has helped confirm the success of using it as a platform.

And I’m not alone in my thinking -- scholars in rhet/comp have suggested in recent years the positive effect that teaching with social media can have with students. In fact, in 2021, Jessica Kester and Stephanie Vie published research that indicated students are generally “interested” in social media writing assignments and see it as a positive and “see opportunities for learning to use social media more critically.” Taking a quick glance through the social media published work in rhet/comp, we only see what it can offer students and the writing classroom, we don’t ever really see the other side of things. Much

like what I said in my intro, we never really see when things don't work.

Social Media Classroom Practices

After surviving spring 2020 and the lockdown that came with it, I decided I needed to teach face-to-face in fall 2020 and that's what I did. I didn't realize the complications that would arise with teaching it and what would need to be negotiated with face masks, COVID tests, quarantines, etc. Add that to learning how to teach both to student in front of you and to students on the screen, and it was tricky. I'm not sure anyone really could have anticipated the complicatedness of it. For winter and spring, I taught fully asynchronous online classes in response to having lived through teaching that way in the fall, seeing the ways in which the students did/did not interact and engage, the complications that came with COVID and the pandemic, and so on. And so, I knew I needed to be creative in my approach in attempt to generate an optimistic community type setting. I decided to use Instagram as my main platform to generate community so that students could talk to another, DM one another, literally see one another, and honestly just engage in ways that you can't do on Canvas. I planned to use all of the Instagram functions – Stories, Posts, & Lives – so that students could have access to me at different points during the week. It also meant I would have to be ok with being somewhat vulnerable – Instagram, no matter how you slice it, still shows a part of your life, and since I would be teaching from home and using my phone, it would show a more up-close and personal view of me. It also meant I would need to post and respond to some of the same questions if I was going to have some posts on my Instagram feed. The primary goals of using Instagram were “a space/place to get to know each other; a space to challenge ourselves outside our comfortable writing zones; and a space to see what we are capable of with visual arguments.” Students posted on Stories 3 times a week and created a Post 1 time a

week. Similarly, I used Twitter in my WRIT 1133 courses. Students posted to Twitter 3-5 times per week in response to the course, the readings, and their research and they also engaged in conversations with their peers. The goals of using Twitter were to write for a real audience, to learn how to be an effective communicator in a digital networked culture, and to use it as a research tool. Additionally, an overarching goal for both courses was to use the platforms to help generate a sense of community in a weird and unpredictable moment.

Creating Communities or a Host of Vulnerabilities

In the past when I've used social media, students have remarked that they enjoy the immediacy of it – they can DM me, for example, and I tend to DM them back quickly (quicker than say an email) or they can Tweet to a peer a question about something the class and the peer responds. They have also commented on how it helps to get to know each other in ways that even a classroom setting doesn't always allow for because social media feels so “natural” to them, they feel comfortable sharing of their personalities on it. Thus, I'd be remiss not to admit to a fair amount of success with using social media. So, I honestly did not think twice about using it as a platform during a moment when students would need the comfort of something they might be familiar with coupled with something they could use to help generate community.

From the start of WRIT 1122 to the conclusion of WRIT 1133, the use of social media in this particular moment was set up for a type of failure, and one aimed at exposing how students deal with feeling uncomfortable about the following areas:

- (1) Seeking out answers on their own (e.g. a deadline, a reading, an assignment sheet). Students may

have grown up immersed in a digital culture, but it may not be fair to assume that they know how to fully understand and navigate all areas of technology. And they also didn't ask where or how to find the answers. They just didn't do. I tried to alleviate this but having schedules/overviews of deadlines on the Canvas Announcements, on the Weekly Overview Modules, in weekly video lectures, on InstaStories and/or daily Tweets but somehow students still could not find the answers to things. I would only find out things out when they wouldn't do something, I'd ask in a grade and they'd respond they couldn't find it. Typically, social media encourages students to engage with me on a more personable level, but for some reason, this time around students did not seek me out over DM to ask questions as readily as they have in the past rather just not doing the thing instead.

- (2) Easily becoming overwhelmed. (It should 100% be noted that we are still living during a pandemic and that is-and-of-itself stressful) -- it did become apparent that some students used feeling overwhelmed as "get-out-free-jail" card. College is at many, or even most times, overwhelming because of what it asks of you as a person and a learner – and I'd argue as a writer – I noticed though that students were not comfortable settling into this feeling of being overwhelmed or even trying to deal with it in healthy ways such as self-care or de-stressing methods instead they turned to trolling (mostly aimed at myself) or not turning in work or

simply giving up entirely. One might argue I'm not being entirely fair with this one, but by using social media it exposed how easily they became overwhelmed or at not attempting to deal with it. As someone who builds in reflection and openly talks about self-care in my classes, I understand the importance of trying to figure out your own best practices. I even offered suggestions to students for possible ways to do de-stress, I gave extensions without asking for any explanations and no penalty, and I still had students write I was "unkind" or "not lenient" or "not understanding about personal issues." It truly seemed like the more I offered them of myself on social media and/or the more I offered in response to them feeling overwhelmed, the more they pushed back on me as a person. They didn't see extensions or any of my offers of help with self-care or Zoom meetings as "helpful", it did not offer them what they felt they needed in their feelings of being overwhelmed. And, if I'm being honest, as the spring quarter wore on, I felt more and more like a failure in this aspect because nothing I tried worked and I concluded the quarter feeling overwhelmed myself. Social media doesn't allow anyone to really hide when you are feeling truly overwhelmed, so not only could I tell when my students were truly overwhelmed, but I'm sure they could also tell when I was overwhelmed.

- (3) Managing being vulnerable. Social media can expose and exploit a host of uncertainties about oneself because of the way it's set up. The call and response nature of it

encourages a response – you post a picture of yourself; you assume it's going to get a response and the assumption is your going to get a positive response but that's not always the case (i.e. trolls). Just because social media is being used for a classroom does not necessarily take away the uncertainty that comes along with posting and responding in such a public facing way, and this was completely evident this past year. Students tended to lash out because they didn't know how to handle this both in response to myself and to other students. Interestingly though it also encouraged students to stand up and push back. For example, at one point in the spring a student Tweeted aggressively at me about an assignment, and I had multiple students DM me asking if they should respond to him. So, while students were struggling to manage some of their own vulnerabilities, they were still willing to stand up for that of others.

So, while the goal was hopeful, the end results were less so. By the conclusion of the courses, several students even struggled to understand the purpose of using social media (responding as such on course evals) which really suggests the fact that they didn't work (although I should note just to be fair: I met one-on-one with many students during both quarters and many of them mentioned to me how much they enjoyed the use of social media for several of same reasons I mention. I'm not sure if that then translated out because they did not show up on my course evals).

Reflecting Back and Looking Forward

I have always believed to become a better educator; I need to be honest and upfront even with myself ... perhaps the most with myself. I think this should be true for anyone who wants to be a good and effective educator, it's why I wonder about publishing more articles on failure or classes that don't work or even having more people writing when students do things that are harmful or malicious to us. We do need to learn from those moments as much as we need to learn from the good and the great moments, the moments where students also learn and move effectively/productively forward.

This year – it was kinda shitty. And social media did not help in fact I am disappointed in the use of the platforms. I had such high hopes when I put my classes together and what they could offer students this year in a crisis moment.

Being honest – I need space to find the light to be hopeful within myself again and also for the students. I'm hoping with summer and some self-care and some self-reflection, I can find a way forward. Right now, I'm just not sure what it looks like.