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Writing Teacher Education in Extraordinary Times

Body of Work

Ben Gunsberg, Utah State University

It’s been almost three months since Utah State University moved classes online. Yesterday the temperature climbed into the low 90’s. Our green valley, bordered by snow-capped mountains, is abuzz. Pollen fills the air. Canals divert the Logan River into hayfields and alfalfa. Hammers accompany the pop of pneumatic nail guns. Skeletal frames of nascent homes rise on the sagebrush slopes behind my house. Traffic has picked up on Main Street. Through this verdant and bustling veneer, reminders of a pandemic surface. Shoppers wear masks. Restaurants advertise curbside pickup. The local health department sends daily emails about the rising number of new cases, hospitalizations, and deaths in the valley. Though our numbers remain relatively low compared to states walloped by Coronavirus, in the past four days, Utah has seen an unprecedented spike in COVID 19 cases. Despite fear and uncertainty, Governor Gary Herbert promises that all schools will offer face-to-face classes in the Fall. I wonder how we’ll meet the health department’s recommendations. Will schools return to online modes of instruction if, as predicted, cases in the U.S. rise dramatically? These questions swirl as I plan for the upcoming semester, and beneath these questions more questions: What worked this spring? What flopped? How will I encourage student engagement? How will I facilitate a welcoming and equitable learning environment despite disparities in access to technology?

I’ve decided to run my Fall courses—“Teaching Literature” and “Poetry Writing”—as web-based classes that meet synchronously during regularly scheduled bell times. Though I have the entire summer to plan, I worry about my limited experience with online instruction. This essay is a first step toward helping me unpack what happened in the Spring so that I might improve what happens in the Fall. I still believe what I told my students during our last face-to-face meeting—sometimes disruptions to the status quo spark insight. In retrospect, the transition to web-based teaching posed significant challenges, but it also helped me recognize what I love most about teaching.

I’m an Associate Professor of English, who teaches English education and creative writing. Before and between pursuing graduate degrees, I taught middle school and high school in New Jersey and Vermont. I’ve been teaching for 23 years, and I’ve never felt more concern about the future of education than I feel today. State and local officials, superintendents, principals, teachers—everyone is struggling to plan for an uncertain Fall. Thankfully, USU halted face-to-face classes in time to stem the spread of COVID 19. This swift conversion
to web-based schooling, however, granted little time to consider the pedagogical ramifications of our choices. We were triage teaching. Only now, as sirens fade and defibrillators recharge, do we have a moment to think through what we did and consider what we should do in the future.

In the week allotted to move “Teaching Writing” and my graduate poetry workshop online, I consulted with colleagues, students, friends, and family. After much hand wringing and wrestling with unfamiliar software, I chose to follow what I considered the simplest approach—asynchronous instruction organized through Canvas, USU’s course management platform. For the remainder of the semester, I planned to facilitate learning through a blend of discussion boards, videos, Canvas Announcements, and email. I toyed with the idea of using Zoom or Webex (a Zoom-like program) to lead real-time discussions, but after reflecting on disparities between students’ access to technology, not to mention profound disruptions to students’ personal lives, I decided that an asynchronous approach would be most equitable and flexible. In retrospect, I’m convinced this was the right decision. Within weeks of moving online, students emailed to report that they had lost housing, that they were relocating to different states, that they needed to work forty hours a week at grocery stores because family members had lost jobs, that they were living at home and sharing one computer with four siblings who were also trying to complete schoolwork online. Students reported feeling anxious, depressed, unmotivated, and frustrated by unreliable internet access. I felt powerless to counteract the storm that engulfed my courses, making them seem insignificant compared to the swell of new cases, the panic buying, and lost wages.

The lockdown affected my personal life as well. A spare bedroom became my office. My children argued over access to our one desktop computer. My wife puzzled over how to teach kindergarten from a distance. By contrast, modifying an upper-level English education course and a graduate poetry writing course seemed simple. I already used Canvas to collect assignments and conduct online discussions. I communicated with students via email, phone, and text. I felt confident that I could resume instruction within the week allotted for USU’s transition. After reviewing my assignments critically, however, I identified an important element of my “Teaching Writing” course that required significant revision. How were students going to practice teaching in front of the class? For the remainder of this essay, I’ll focus on how I modified this key assignment, how it faltered, and what I learned in the process.

Students enrolled in “Teaching Writing” are required to plan and deliver thirty-minute lessons in front of their peers. Following the lesson, we conduct a workshop focused on what worked, what could be improved, and how the lesson might be integrated into a more robust unit plan. I offer this “micro-teaching” assignment in all of my methods classes, and students often report that it’s one of the most useful exercises in our English education curriculum. As I revised this assignment toward digital delivery, I considered various alternatives, such as livestreamed or recorded video lessons, but these options were simply
too dependent on specialized technology—cameras, microphones, and video editing equipment. Instead, I asked students to write highly scripted lessons that not only included the required elements of conventional lesson plans, such as the lesson’s objective, state standards, materials, instructional input, assessment, and so forth, but also fictional accounts of how they imagined their lessons would unfold. I gave students the option to format their lessons as dramatic scripts or as prose. This approach, I recognized, abandoned the energy and spontaneity of a live classroom, but by imagining their lessons, I anticipated my preservice teachers might identify trouble spots and opportunities that would go unnoticed in a live setting.

I encouraged the class to have fun with this assignment, to imagine what their students might say or do in response to instruction. By narrativizing their lessons, I hoped my students might deploy writing as a tool for discovery. What I received, however, were dry, though lengthy, move-by-move descriptions of English/Language Arts lessons. The compliant, task-oriented students in these fictionalized accounts were about as animated as cardboard cutouts. Other than the occasional clarifying question—How many sentences should we write? Do we turn this in for credit?—virtual silence permeated these dramatized lessons. Students’ imaginary classrooms, it turned out, were populated by hyper-attentive robots. Reading these dramatized lessons, I realized that my students had utterly unrealistic visions of classroom dynamics. They envisioned efficient, organized—perhaps sterilized—contexts, in which secondary students act in predictable, and thus unrealistic, ways, saying exactly what they “should” say, doing exactly as they’re told.

The lessons themselves, though thorough and well-conceived, were stilted and improbable. My students, it seemed, understood how to construct lesson plans but struggled to imagine the spontaneous, often messy, implementation of these plans. Looking back, I recognize that this outcome was likely a function of both students’ inexperience and my humdrum assignment description, which did not specifically ask students to imagine everything that could go wrong in their lesson, to solve a classroom management problem, or to have fictional students pose questions that might push the discussion in unanticipated directions. I realize now that this is precisely what I should have done, and what I’ll likely do when I teach the “Teaching Literature” methods course in the Fall.

The bland results of my dramatized micro-teaching experiment got me thinking about the “live” version of the assignment. Instead of acting like upper-level college students, perhaps students should role-play whatever target grade is specified in the lesson plan. After all, the micro-teaching assignment aims to offer students opportunities to teach “real” lessons in front of me and their peers. We serve as a mock audience and receive the lesson as if we were secondary students, but we don’t act like seventh graders who can’t sit still after lunch or tenth graders trying to shake off an insult hurled in the hallway. We follow the lesson with interest, raise our hands; we answer questions posed by the teacher. In short, we act very much like the characters populating the fictional accounts accompanying my students’ lessons.
The micro-teaching assignment succeeds in a live, brick-and-mortar context because students must adjust on the fly. They read the room and pace their lessons to accommodate their classmates’ responses. If an activity is going well, they might allow it to continue beyond its planned timeframe. If an activity is not going well, students improvise in an effort to clarify a point or amplify engagement. These improvisations and adjustments occur in real-time and draw from my students’ abilities to fine-tune instruction according to the feedback they receive from their peers. The ability to improvise, adjust, and engage students arises from a dynamic, embodied awareness of group and individual responses to instruction. It can be imagined as a dance or the experience of playing improvisational music. Not only is it a necessary skill for teachers, I would argue that for many teachers it’s a source of pleasure and excitement. Indeed, it’s what motivated me throughout my career as a middle and high school teacher, and it’s what continues to motivate me as a college professor.

When this live aspect of teaching was withdrawn three months ago, I became acutely—depressingly—aware of its crucial role in my own motivation. The experience of standing in front of a class, of teaching, yes, but also responding to students’ questions, reading their posture, facial expressions, tones of voice, and silences. Responding to spirited, sometimes wild, shifts in conversation and witnessing how one comment or question colors the mood in the room. How a joke tempers anxiety before a midterm; how a flash of insight or personal anecdote elicits a probing question or an ingenious off-the-cuff allusion to Shakespeare or Harry Potter. In short, I missed the mess and magic of real-time, embodied teaching.

This Fall, I plan to teach web-based courses because I feel it’s the safest option given the uncertainty associated with the Coronavirus pandemic. The courses will be “live” in the sense that we will meet synchronously, but they will lack the embodied presence that buttresses my enthusiasm. Unlike my experience teaching in the Spring, in the Fall students will be able to pose questions and contribute to discussions in real-time. This sounds good in theory, but anyone who has used Zoom or Webex to run a meeting or lead a class, recognizes the profound difference between web-based and in-person instruction. As I plan for Fall semester, I’m not only concerned about facilitating group-work, presentations, and workshops online; I’m also concerned about my own and my students’ motivation. My love of teaching, I’ve come to realize is much more embodied than I imagined. This insight reminds me of the phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who wrote, “The body is our general medium for having a world” (169). Teaching and learning is not the transfer of information from one brain to another. It’s co-constructed meaning making. For me and for some of my students, it’s also being in a place together. It’s the shared oxygen of the classroom, the shared hum of university groundskeepers mowing grass on the quad. A shared glimpse of early snow outside the classroom window. The shared complaints after a mountain hailstorm in late spring. Most importantly, it’s the subtle cues we read in one another and in our environment. Call and response. Give and receive. It’s how we know we’re human.
Works Cited