

Teaching Writing Online During the Pandemic, Spring 2020

Submitted to the Loyola University Archive

In fall 2019 and again in spring 2020, the Loyola University English department hired me to teach a section of UCWR 110, the university's core writing seminar. Before teaching at Loyola, I was on the faculty at Texas State University for thirty-seven years. For twenty years, I directed Texas State's first-year writing program and then served as English department chair and later as dean of the College of Liberal Arts. I retired to Chicago in 2017.

Once I retired, I missed teaching, so I applied for adjunct work and was pleased to be hired by Loyola because I'd earned my degrees at Jesuit institutions (Seattle University and Marquette University). Coming to the lakeshore campus for class made me feel at home, and a little nostalgic.

The students in my classes were serious, hard-working, somewhat reserved, but also confident in a low-keyed way. They were a pleasure to teach. In the fall, they came from all over the country—Seattle, L.A., Boston, Wichita—were mostly graduates of public schools (which surprised me), and varied in ethnicity, religion, and outlook. All of them made significant progress as writers in what is a rigorous course on academic argument.

In the spring my students were less “national”—mostly from the Chicago suburbs, only one from Chicago proper, and only a few from far away, e.g., New Jersey, California, Mexico. Amazingly, almost half of the nineteen spoke a language other than English growing up: Gujrati, Hungarian, Italian (3), Tagalog, Urdu, and Spanish. Almost all were children of immigrants, and those who weren't were grandchildren of immigrants. We read essays by Richard Rodriguez and Amy Tan about the immigrant experience, and several students tapped into their family histories in writing about those essays.

Class meetings ended on March 13 when Loyola sent everyone home and went 100% online because of the pandemic. Fortunately, the rest of my course was devoted to a substantial research paper, so I ended up more or less teaching nineteen separate online tutorials. Some students did well. Others struggled with the sudden departure from campus and the return to family life. For some, I believe, it was difficult to be a “child” again, at home with parents and siblings, “sheltering in place” because of the virus, especially after living independently on campus for six months. Motivation was an issue for some, and it took coaching from me to help everyone get across the finish line. One student lost both his grandparents to the virus on the same day in early April (he took an incomplete). This student and I exchanged several emails, and I marveled at how mature and thoughtful he was, though obviously deeply sad about his loss.

For me, too, being 100% online was challenging. I'd never taught anything but a face-to-face course. Because I had only one section, I was able to handle much of the course as a tutorial—e.g., commenting on topics, plans, and drafts via the course management software (Sakai) and exchanging email with individual students. (I'm sure the online format was much more daunting for those teaching four sections.) I wrote to the entire class frequently, providing "instruction," something that's much easier and more effective face-to-face where students can ask impromptu questions and the instructor can take cues from facial expressions and body language.

In retrospect, I wonder if I should have used Zoom or another software program to "meet" with students as a group—or FaceTime to talk with them one-on-one. But everything worked out in the end. A few students said they actually liked the "tutorial" approach and the flexible schedule. What they (and I) seemed to miss most was in-class peer reviews of their writing. All students finished the course successfully, except the one who took an incomplete, and I was only disappointed that a couple did not earn better grades.

So, what did I learn about teaching "remote." First, that it can be done successfully, at least in a writing course, but that it's also labor intensive. Second, that what I love most about teaching can happen only when I'm in the same room with my students.

In lieu of a final exam, I asked students to write a paper reflecting on their progress as writers and students. I told them that they could include observations about online learning and the effect of the coronavirus on their lives. Below, for the archive, I've quoted passages from eight of the papers. Students gave me written permission to submit these passages and to identify them by name. All eight students are freshmen. One (Rida) is in her first semester at Loyola, the others in their second semester. One was a commuter (Emaan); the others lived on campus.

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Here are the passages from my students' papers:

What a great first semester it has been for me. I got to finally experience the life of a college student living in a dorm, eating whatever I possibly could, and procrastinating till the last minute. It was fun for a few weeks, until a pandemic came and I suddenly had to go back home and switch to doing online work. . . . The research paper was by far the hardest paper this semester. It came after I moved back home and lost some motivation to do any work at all. I knew I had to keep writing in chunks or else I

wouldn't have gotten it done at all. I spent tremendous amounts of time just reading article after article until I found some that I knew would work well into my argument. I learned that not all things are believable online, and that I should pick and choose what to believe very carefully. --**Rida Laliwala**

The switch to online classes was something I believe to have been ultimately detrimental to me and my academic record. The initial transition was very hard on me for personal reasons, and I found it immensely difficult to get any sort of work done, whether that be academic or personal. Without a social life and without the tangibility of my assignments, it was very easy for me to slip into a state of almost willful ignorance, a world wherein I didn't have any responsibilities and could just watch movies and play games without any attention to my courses. This was a coping mechanism, of course, because any efforts to confront the reality of my circumstances were liable to lead me down a mental path that wasn't healthy for me. And it was in this state that I survived the first couple of weeks of quarantine. It wasn't until several overdue assignments and corresponding emails from my professors that I began to will myself back into the mindset of academia. The quarantine had certainly taken a toll on the quality of my assignments, many of which I was now doing last minute and without any guidance from peers or professors. All of my work was rushed and maintained a feeling of incompleteness, but given the circumstances, it would have taken a long time for me to return to the regular quality of my work.

But academic writing aside, one of the best coping mechanisms that I've found in quarantine is writing. My personal writing varies vastly from my college writing; much of the work I produce without the pressure of academics is more artistically liberal and reads closer to poetry than anything else. But oddly enough, one of my favorite newfound pastimes in quarantine has been the creation of haikus! Prior to this time in my life, it was a medium I never cared for, but now they always seem to pop into my head. They're easy to make, can be created totally mentally, and are an excellent way to occupy the mind. Even more fun, one can include their friends in the process. One project I did was asking my friends to text me lines that were five syllables long, then other friends' lines that were seven, and so on. I thought this was a very unusual but enjoyable take on the social component of the haiku process, as they have traditionally been made in groups or other social settings. --**Aslan Mutuwa**

It's hard to talk about any class this semester without addressing the switch to online learning. Fortunately, I found that this class was easier to do online than most others. Although I found our in-class discussions helpful and interesting, most of the written work could still be done online. Switching this class to an online format made me realize how helpful it is to have peer-review, especially from people in my own class who understand the topics I have written about. But, regardless of the class or situation, I

think we can all say that online learning makes you truly appreciate the luxury of learning in a classroom. **–Mary Baertlein**

The move of school online has been difficult, but as a commuter I am grateful for Loyola's decision. I was scared that I would contract the virus and spread it to my family, especially since my father has health conditions that put him at risk. Most professors have been extremely accommodating and forgiving since the move online, which I greatly appreciate. But other professors have made the load of work even harder, because we are at home. The whole situation has been exhausting, and I feel drained mentally. Online school in general has made me unmotivated and has made studying more difficult. I think the hardest part is losing my focus while studying because there is no quiet place for me to go and study. While on campus, there are so many different places to study that accommodate my different needs. If I needed silence I could go to the IC [Information Commons], and I miss the brightness of the sun while studying in Palm Court. These are just two of the places I am patiently waiting to experience again. . . . Being away from Loyola had made me realize how important it is to me. I miss the people, I miss my classes, and I miss the sunsets by the lake. But reflecting on my experience there so far has made me realize how much I have grown. **–Emaan Shaikh**

I, just like everyone else, was devastated when I found out that Loyola would be shutting down and we would have to return to our homes. It seemed that through a series of unfortunate events, my first-year experience at Loyola had been unfairly and instantly taken away from me. However, as my father and I made the 800-mile drive back to my home state of New Jersey, I had a lot of time to think. After having selfishly thought about myself, I then had time to put other people's realities into perspective. Of course, it was unfortunate that my first year prematurely finished; however, throughout the 12-hour drive, I thought about those who would not see another day because of the virus. I knew that grim days were ahead, but I realized that without perspective I would not have thought twice about my life. So, I knew that for the next few months I would have nothing else to do but think.

Personally, I enjoy working on my own schedule. Contrary to having to go to class, I find pleasure in being able to do my work in my bed. With my writing, I feel that the isolation with this pandemic has helped me to focus with just my thoughts and the laptop. I think that when one's present is dead, one is forced to reflect on his or her past. With few outside distractions, I have found solace in writing. In order to exercise my abilities as a writer, I have taken up the time to keep a notebook to write my thoughts in. Funny as it may be, this journal has kept me grounded in reality as I remain protected in my home while days morph into weeks. **--Ryan Cordero**

Unfortunately, UCWR 110 had to be moved online due to the current pandemic and social distancing laws. As challenging as the quick change may seem, it was to my surprise that I was able to maintain my academics on a good note for the remainder of the semester. It is true that technology can be considered a blessing or a curse to many people; however, it is important to admit that it has allowed education to proceed with no interruptions. Two months ago, I would have never imagined the current online learning situation, but education has no limits. At just a click of a button, resources such as teachers, online articles, writing tips, etc. are available for students. The sudden switch to online learning did not affect my writing, instead it has given me the opportunity to explore further writing methods by using online sources. This is a clear example of the importance of taking the good out of every situation; you can always find the bright side out of every setback, even during this pandemic. –***Silvia Gonzalez***

This wouldn't be a proper reflection on 2020 if I didn't talk about the coronavirus and how it affected me as a student. Being a freshman on campus, I was broken when I heard that we were going to have to transition to online classes. I was finally getting used to being a college student, and all of that was taken away from me. I was worried when I heard of the E-Learning switch and how it would affect my academics. . . . I had a feeling that this switch would not be beneficial because of my procrastination problem. Online classes made for more free time, therefore leading to more procrastination. –***Marco Izrael***

Through the transition to online classes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my time management ability and motivation were definitely tested more than they ever had been on campus. When on campus, I had motivation to study as going to the library to study with friends was a part of my normal routine. This often led to me staying a day or two ahead on work and rarely pushing deadlines. However, this changed when I moved back home to continue classes, as I no longer had as much motivation to get work done ahead of time. I managed to make it through the semester by pushing deadlines, but I definitely was not as comfortable with this as I had been on campus. The consequences of poor time management proved to me that finding the motivation to stay ahead with my work is definitely worthwhile and I should try my best to do so when I return to campus. –***Samuel Reid***