Turns Out You Can Build Community in a Zoom Classroom

A professor finds that personal essays are surprisingly effective in building relationships in a synchronous virtual classroom.

By Rachel Toor JUNE 23, 2020 CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Covid-19 made this spring — well, you know the words: unprecedented, uncertain, weird, insane, scary. But it posed even more challenges for professors who teach in 10-week quarters. After all, those of you on the semester system had already met and connected with your students when campuses began shutting down over spring break. At least you could use the remaining weeks of the semester to build on what you had started in person.

Those of us on the quarter system didn't have anything to build on. We came back from spring break to entirely new courses in virtual classrooms filled with new students, many of whom we'd never met. We had to create community from scratch.

How that played out in my own courses, which just wrapped up this month, may be of use to faculty members looking for ways to better connect with students online in the fall. My biggest surprise was the effectiveness of personal essays in building relationships in a Zoom classroom. I teach creative writing, but this kind of writing assignment could achieve the same ends in teaching any subject.

One of my spring courses was a graduate nonfiction class. It was fairly easy to build community in that course because I knew most of the students and they knew one another. We all agreed that, except for sharing snacks during class and liquid socializing afterward, class online was much the same as face to face. We met at our regularly scheduled time on Zoom, though for a shorter duration than usual. The students posted their work for others to read and offer critiques.

But trying to build community in my undergraduate course, "Introduction to Fiction," was a different story. The students ranged in age from 16 to 27. They didn't know me or one another. We had to cover a lot of ground to establish trust and sympathy.

Early on I learned they were miserable. They were going nuts living at home after having tasted the freedoms of dorm life. They mourned marking birthdays without their friends. They continued to work jobs that put them into contact with customers who weren't always sympathetic to Covid-necessitated precautions. They were afraid of getting sick and of getting those they loved sick. They watched *Tiger King* and played Animal Crossing. They drank. A lot. They paid attention to their pets and got high. They

spent time with parents who had their own substance-abuse issues. They continued to hang out with friends, even though they worried that it wasn't safe.

I took time at the beginning of each Zoom session to check in with them, but the thing that most helped build community was something I've routinely done in face-to-face classes. Each week, in addition to more traditional academic work, I asked students to write a personal essay — a low-stakes, ungraded assignment — and to post it on the course website on a discussion thread that I call the "sandbox." It's a place to try things out, respond to prompts, practice creative writing.

This spring in the sandbox, students who didn't know one another wrote deeply personal essays — about sexuality, about race, about their moms, about how much they were drinking, about how much they love their siblings and hate the sitting president, about their suicidal thoughts, about their inability to focus and do the reading.

I divided the class into small groups so that students could comment on one another's sandbox essays — not to criticize but to be encouraging. The idea was for students to write free of the fear of judgment. So in their small groups, I asked them to highlight a "gold star sentence" in each essay — the place where the writer really hit the mark, either by using language that sang or expressing an idea that was profound, universal, or just plain delightful.

Over the course of the quarter, they got to know one another by reading those sandbox essays. The writing became more vulnerable, more authentic, and, frankly, a whole lot better. That was a function of learning tools and tricks from published writing, but also of getting more comfortable using their own voices.

Next fall I will continue to use the sandbox. The spring semester taught me other lessons, too, about how to help students adjust to one another in a synchronous classroom, and to a professor they've never met in person. Here are some other things I want to remember to do when we are once again online.

1. **Allow for small-group interactions.** My classes were small enough that I didn't break them up into smaller Zoom rooms, but next fall I will. Online, just as in a face-to-face classroom, it's often a tiny group of students who do most of the talking. On Zoom, you can literally see the dominant talkers taking the spotlight onto themselves and away from others. For the shy and reticent, being in a more intimate group can allow them a chance to speak.

2. **Let them "chat" during Zoom class.** For those less inclined to speak, encouraging comments in the chat function of whatever videoconferening tool you are using gives students an opportunity to express themselves and also lightens the mood. I resisted that for most of the quarter based on my experience in our university Zoom meetings (lots of inane comments, empty cheerleadering, and self-interested praise of people with proximity to power). But toward the end of the quarter I lightened up and let the Zoom chat fly, and it made things more fun.

3. **Less is just as good, or better, than more.** Instead of assigning novels or books, I will use shorter reading assignments that accomplish the same pedagogical goals. That is not giving up on rigor; it's simply recognizing that no one, including me, has the same attention span as before Covid-19. Many of my students complained that they were overwhelmed by the workload in their classes. I tend to assign a lot of reading. The graduate students dug into it. But the undergrads needed less. Next fall: shorter assignments.

4. **Grades don't have to be an additional stressor.** I've long used a system called "contract grading." If students do all the work, they get an A. The grade goes down in draconian fashion for work that is late and/or incomplete. But during a pandemic, students often had family obligations or grocery shopping to do, or needed to take care of siblings. So in the spring quarter I decided not to penalize late work. Everyone managed to complete nearly all of the assignments, mostly on time.

5. **Peer review is a great tool.** We worked together to come up with a rubric for the required analytic essays, and students gave one another feedback. No grades. In this way, students taught other students and felt invested in their success.

6. **Hold office hours.** Except that, when I did this spring, no one showed up. So I emailed individual students and said I'd like to chat with them. Often it was better to do that after class when we were already Zooming. Next fall I will ask each student to schedule an appointment with me during office hours.

7. **Email, email, email.** At the risk of feeling like a nag, I reached out by email, especially to praise work from students who may have felt less visible or to check in with those who were lagging behind. I suggested extra reading based on what I perceived as their interests but made it clear that it was not an assignment. Many of the students appreciated the suggestions and recommended them to peers.

8. **Make all assignments due at the same time each week.** Just as I do during nonpandemic times, I had everything due at the same time and day of the week. Students told me that they were having trouble keeping track of what was due when for different classes, especially those that were asynchronous.

9. **Identify students who are struggling early.** By assigning them an initial written introduction, I had a good sense of each student's relative strengths and weaknesses. I was able to keep an eye on those who were less engaged and just going through the motions and made it a mission to find assignments that could light them up.

10. **Give strong students more responsibility.** In a class with diverse abilities, the best students are likely to be bored. I usually deputize a student to take notes in class because I tend to toss off a bunch of additional reading recommendations. These students always write lively recaps so that anyone who misses class knows exactly what we covered. And they earn slobbering gratitude from their peers and me. Often students will ask the notetaker questions about assignments, rather than me.

11. **Meet at scheduled times.** Like many faculty members, folks in my English department had heated discussions on the pros and cons of synchronous versus asynchronous courses. As we've all become accustomed to Zoom, it was clear to me, at least, that students who had not explicitly chosen to learn online wanted real-time interaction with me, and, perhaps even more, with their peers in the class.

I found it fairly easy to transition to Zoom discussions, and because I've always required students to post their responses and creative work for all to read, I didn't even have to tweak my syllabus, except to ditch some of the required reading when it became clear that students were too overwhelmed to do it all.

Instead, I worked hard on creating relationships. Students want to be seen, to know that we care about them, to be reminded that we understand that they're struggling. Writing about themselves allowed that to happen and them to express themselves as the flawed, scared, and wonderful humans they are.

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