Community Building for Better Outcomes: Our Silver Lining from Teaching in a Pandemic

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When we set out to plan our fall remote legal-writing course in summer 2020, we found ourselves in a bit of a panic. We covered it well on the surface, sharing exercises and tips with colleagues to ground ourselves and show that we had concrete ideas for the fall. Beneath that surface, however, we each frantically researched how to teach effectively online,[1] considered high-tech, low-tech,[2] and

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[1] *See, e.g.*, Harv. Bus. Publ'g: Education, Online Teaching Resources, https://hbsp.harvard.edu/teaching-online-resources/.

[2] *See, e.g.*, Flower Darby, *5 Low-Tech, Time-Saving Ways to Teach Online During Covid-19*, Chron. Higher Educ., Apr. 14, 2020, https://www.chronicle.com/article/5-low-tech-time-saving-ways-to-teach-online-during-covid-19/.

flipped-classroom tools, and watched videos on how to make videos.[3] We spent too much time curating our work-at-home spaces, taught each other all the features of an ever-changing Zoom, and worried about whether we would be at all personable, let alone funny,[4] online.

Beyond the classroom, we wondered whether we would have time to finish any kind of scholarly writing or connect with our colleagues. In our daily lives, we continued to try to find toilet paper and cleaner and groceries to take care of our families. We wondered how we would balance teaching our own kids who would be attending school virtually from home. And as concerned citizens, we protested racial injustice, and we made choices about voting–not just for whom, but whether to vote by mail or in person. As we juggled all of our roles and responsibilities, we tried to focus on the important task of educating lawyers-to-be. We knew that we had a big challenge ahead of us. We would be teaching legal writing remotely . . . during a pandemic and time of political unrest.

Teaching in a new format presents a number of challenges in normal circumstances, and these circumstances certainly were not normal. As we came to the end of the summer, we were in information overload and time was short. Ultimately, we opted for a triage approach, determining where we needed to focus our efforts. We realized that though some aspects of Zoom teaching could look like in-classroom teaching, such as exercises, lectures, and assignments, truly successful teaching during a pandemic would require a greater effort on our part to build community with and among our students.[5]

We were concerned that Zoom might not offer the organic experiences of the physical classroom that engage and connect students. We anticipated that students would be more anxious with all that was happening in the world, as were we, and we realized that creating a charitable environment would be more important than ever. Because we no longer had a physical classroom, we looked for ways to maximize opportunities to connect over Zoom and to use our Canvas pages as extended classrooms. Specifically, we set out to create spaces where our students could connect on a personal level, collaborate, and be kind to each other.

To this end, we developed several strategies that we employed in our classrooms to bring students together and create a successful classroom environment

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[3] *See, e.g.*, Jeffrey R. Young, *How YouTube Star John Green Thinks About His Educational Videos*, EDSURGE PODCAST, Apr. 28, 2020, https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-04-28-how-youtube-star-john-green-thinks-about-his-educational-videos/.

[4] *See, e.g.*, David Nihill, *Do You Talk Funny*, Talks at Google, Mar. 23, 2016, https://talksat.withgoogle.com/talk/do-you-talk-funny/.

[5] *See* Erin Carroll, Opinion, *Turning Class into Community is More than a Zoom Happy Hour*, AUSTIN AM. STATESMAN, Aug. 20, 2020 ("As a teacher, I know building community is foundational. It is how we create the trust that allows students to make mistakes and grow. It is how we motivate them to succeed.").

online. We are happy to report that these efforts paid off not only with our students' emotional well-being, but also our students' ability to learn,[6] and that we plan to continue our extra efforts to deliberately build community when we return to our physical classrooms.

While 2020 was challenging in so many ways, we learned why fostering connections is so important to teaching, whether online or not, and reaped the benefits of laying this groundwork. Legal writing scholars have recognized that "an inherent power exists in conversations our students generate" and to use this power "we have to encourage a classroom community that allows this conversation to start, flourish, and persist."[7] We asked our students to connect through videos, collaborate through posts, and share through chat; the result was a rich conversation that fostered student-driven learning. This is how we did it.

1. Creating connection: video introductions

The first challenge was helping students create a meaningful connection with their classmates without having the opportunity to meet in person. In a more traditional course, building these bridges may not be essential to student learning. In our class, however, where students learn not only through lecture, but class exercises, peer critique, and group work, the students need to become comfortable with and respect each other to provide and accept constructive feedback and suggestions. Such collaboration generates learning. But collaboration among students and between students starts with getting to know one another at the beginning of the semester. How were students going to get to know each other and us over Zoom?

Our role became one of facilitating the interactions that, in a typical semester, occur naturally as students sit near each other in classrooms, run into each other in the hallways, and socialize in and outside the law school. We reverted to the same method we had used in the past—student self-introductions—but used technology to create the setting.

Students were asked to post a short (30- to 60-second) self-introduction video to a Canvas discussion board—a platform students can use to engage in a threaded discussion on a specified topic. We intentionally avoided providing too much direction, so as not to impose technological or other barriers, as well as to allow stu-

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[6] *See* Laura P. Graham, *Generation Z Goes to Law School: Teaching and Reaching Law Students in the Post-Millennial Generation*, 41 U. ARK. LITTLE ROCK L. REV. 29, 43 (2018) (citing M.H. Sam Jacobson, *Paying Attention or Fatally Distracted? Concentration, Memory, and Multi-Tasking in a Multi-Media World*, 16 LEGAL WRITING 419, 454-55 (2010), to note that anxiety and stress "stretch our attention span, affect our perception, skew our filtering process toward negative and fear-inducing stimuli, weaken our memory, and obstruct our high-level cognition.")

[7] Elizabeth L. Inglehart et al., *From Cooperative Learning to Collaborative Writing in the Legal Writing Classroom*, 9 LEGAL WRITING 185, 190 (2003).

dents agency to shape their class persona. Students were instructed simply to include: 1) their full name; 2) what they would like to be called; and 3) what makes them happy[8] or what they are passionate about. The last item was meant to shift their focus away from waxing prolific about their credentials or résumés in a way that might chill others. We also set the discussion board so students could only view other students' videos once they had posted their own. To break the ice, we provided our own self-introductions.

The video assignment was successful on several levels. Flexible technological requirements allowed students to use any familiar platforms, which many students took advantage of by simply uploading videos from their phones. Setting the introductions online avoided directly replicating the turn-by-turn first class introductions that, on Zoom, would carry over poorly, becoming a tedious and lengthy dedication of precious Zoom time.

The assignment also avoided in-classroom pitfalls we have noticed in previous years of students becoming constrained by the introductions of their peers—whether it be to follow the same model, repeat what others had said, or feel intimidated by a comparison to peers' age, credentials, or experience. In fact, the video introductions were even more varied and personalized than those we had received in class before the shift to online learning.

We found that video introductions were not only a substitute for classroom interactions but had their own value as well. Students took the time to closely review each other's videos and could go back and look at them later. They also used the discussion board platform to build connections, commenting on each other's posts. Students commented on sports, pets, house plants, and (claimed) baking skills while they recognized their common interests. They scheduled Netflix parties or shared their favorite music. One student completed a Rubik's cube in under a minute as part of his introduction, which generated conversation into the semester.

As professors, we were able to practice students' names we found personally challenging by replaying how students pronounced their names, thus avoiding singling out students in class and helping avoid engaging in microaggressions.[9] We were able to match names to faces, gain a sense of each student's personality, and welcome each student individually through our own comments in response

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[8] The idea to have students discuss what makes them happy originated from a writing prompt first shared with one of the authors by Heidi K. Brown at Brooklyn Law School.

[9] *See generally* Rita Kohli & Daniel G. Solórzano, *Teachers, Please Learn Our Names!: Racial Microaggressions and the K-12 Classroom*, 15 RACE ETHNICITY & EDUC. 444 (2012), available at https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13613324.2012.674026; *see also* Punita Chhabra Rice, *Pronouncing Students' Names Correctly Should Be a Big Deal*, EDUC. WEEK, Nov. 15, 2017, https://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2017/11/15/pronouncing-students-names-correctly-should-be-a.html.

to students' posts, in a way that might otherwise be constrained by time in a classroom setting.

2. Building collaboration: online discussion

The next challenge was figuring out how to translate group work to our classroom. When small group work happens during the semester, we typically divide students and have them sit with their classmates in assigned corners of the classroom. We move around the classroom while the students are meeting, visiting different student groups. We peer over shoulders and listen in on conversations to get a sense of what students are understanding and what they are not. Sometimes we offer brief guidance to get students back on track or confirm that students are making good progress.

Zoom breakout rooms could be used for small group discussion, but we found that it was awkward for us to pop in and out of the students' online meeting space, and we were not able to listen in without being somewhat intrusive. So we decided to use the Canvas discussion board once more—this time to facilitate the collaborative aspects of our course and to build a community for engagement.

Our choice to have students share homework on the Canvas discussion board rather than submit to us turned out to be a wise decision with a host of unanticipated benefits. Posting individual students' homework to other students did not seem at first like a good way to reduce student anxiety, but the pressure of knowing their fellow students could be viewing their posts seemed to have a mostly positive effect. Students took extra care in doing their work. Like with the introductions, students could not see each other's posts until after they had posted themselves. But once they had contributed their own post, they could then immediately see the work their peers had done. This instant feedback was a bit of a bonus, and students did not have to wonder how their work compared to that of their fellow students because everyone could see what others had submitted. But they also had an opportunity to see that they were not the only ones making mistakes.

Even more significantly, students could learn from their fellow students' work. For example, students were asked to find three cases for their legal research assignment, and post on the discussion board the names and citation information for each case, explain why it was relevant, and discuss how they found it. Students not only could see what cases other students found but read why their peers focused on the cases that they did and see what research methods they used. They could also go back to review the posts, which created an ongoing benefit that non-recorded in-class group work does not provide.

In using the discussion board, we tapped into something that we had not expected. While legal writing classrooms are often collaborative, we had been propelled to take collaboration to a new level and along the way had discovered new

benefits from openness and transparency in the classroom. In cooperative learning, students benefit from learning directly from one another.[10] The discussion board had allowed students a greater opportunity to share their work than our small groups in the classroom had ever offered.

3. Fostering kindness: chat

The final challenge was figuring out how to keep students connected as the semester went on. We decided to use the Zoom chat fixture to help during the classes themselves. For a course that relies on successful student-to-student collaboration, in-class chat served as a crucial means to foster kindness and thus further build community.[11] For us, it became a way to keep conversations focused and engage a broader group of students in them. We found two methods particularly successful: 1) allowing students to help each other with "easy" questions; and 2) setting aside time for an in-class chat prompt and response to help keep class conversations on track.

First, we allowed students to have a back-channel chat during class. Early in the semester, we encouraged students to enter technical, easy, or quick questions into chat for student teaching assistants or their fellow students to answer, such as *what case are we discussing?*, *where is this document located?*, and *when is the assignment due again?* In person, it can be difficult for a professor to gauge when a student has such a question, as all the professor sees is the raised hand. Calling on the student poses a risk: the student might ask an off-topic question that pauses or derails the discussion. If a student does not raise her hand but instead asks her neighbor for help, the whispered conversation can become distracting.

Allowing the in-class back-channel chat had several benefits. It provided opportunities for students to help each other in small ways that helped cement our community. It also allowed students to support each other—*Totally agree!* or *Nice work!* or *Thanks!* began to appear surprisingly—and gratifyingly—frequently. For us, class discussion became more efficient, but keeping an eye on the chat still allowed us to identify unanticipated roadblocks to student understanding. If necessary, we could stop to address those roadblocks; otherwise, they became opportunities for student-to-student interaction.

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[10] *See* Inglehart et al., *supra* note 7, at 190 ("[C]ooperative and collaborative pedagogies . . . have shown that students often learn better indirectly from teachers (through constructed group work) and directly from other students (in the discourse associated with that group work).").

[11] *See* Vivek H. Murthy, Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World 72-76 (2020) (discussing how political leaders have strengthened physical communities, including school districts, through kindness initiatives).

Second, we set up an in-class chat prompt and response. This method once again showed how online tools could surpass live teaching methods. We asked substantive questions, then asked all the students to take a minute to think through their response and briefly respond in the chat. Allowing everyone to respond created benefits for the whole community. In the physical classroom, a professor might pose a *How would you do this?* or *What is the best answer?* question, then blindly call on one student, who might provide a response that is off-point. Alternatively, one or more students with a tendency to raise their hands might dominate the discussion. Viewing responses on chat allowed us to make an informed selection of which student to engage in further discussion.

For students, the in-class chat and response equalized their opportunity to engage and facilitated their learning. All students were expected to participate, and they did. That all students could and were expected to respond seemed to lower the stakes from being individually "on call." Like the discussion posts described above, students were also able to compare responses. And we were able to gauge understanding of the material across the class as a whole.

Students quickly realized that they were on the right track if they were called on and seemed more comfortable speaking before the class. The opportunity for fuller participation also gave all students the ability to use the prompt as a mini practice test, which allows students to retrieve and apply learned information—a method that has been shown to improve student learning generally.[12] Finally, the chat and response provided time for students who needed it to engage in "deliberation, contemplation, and quiet reflection."[13] In using chat, we discovered a way to foster positive interactions among students and equalize the benefits of active participation in class.

4. Conclusion

Teaching in our new online format during a pandemic has not been easy. It has had a silver lining, however, in allowing us to think intentionally about how to build a community in our classroom by fostering connection, collaboration, and kindness. By learning how to take advantage of the technological tools we had

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[12] John Dunlosky et al., *Improving Students' Learning with Effective Learning Techniques: Promising Directions from Cognitive and Educational Psychology*, 14 PSYCH. SCI. PUB. INT. 4, 33, 35 (2013); *see also* Pooja K. Agarwal & Henry L. Roediger, III, *Lessons for Learning: How Cognitive Psychology Informs Classroom Practice*, PHI DELTA KAPPAN, Nov. 26, 2018, https://kappanonline.org/agarwal-roediger-lessons-for-learning-how-cognitive-psychology-informs-classroom-practice/.

[13] A. Rachel Camp, *Creating Space for Silence in Law School Collaborations*, 65 J. LEGAL EDUC. 897, 899 (2016).

available, we and (we hope) our students reaped the benefits of community building.

These are lessons and benefits we can carry with us when we return to physical classrooms. Asking students to post introduction videos online before a first class meeting, for example, can create a foundation for personal connections that will propel the first class discussion. Creating discussion post assignments will allow students to collaborate and learn from each other even beyond classroom hours.

Online chat can also be carried over into class and used intentionally to gauge understanding at set-aside times. We and our students already used computers and other technology in class; in-class chat has proven to be another tool in our toolkits. But even if we are not sure we will be sad to say goodbye to Zoom when we move back to our classrooms, we can still take what we learned with us. Now that we have tried integrating the use of technology into our teaching, we feel more comfortable doing so to test students' knowledge. We have also learned the value of allowing a space for students to ask mundane questions, reflect on the lesson, or even give an encouraging shout-out to a peer.

The most important lesson we learned this year was that building community in our class was fundamental to its success. Connection, collaboration, and kindness were our means for making the best out of our pandemic teaching moment. We look forward to taking what we have learned back into our classrooms and meeting our students in person soon.