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NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Coping Strategies in the 2020-21 Virtual Classroom: A Tribute to my Students

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<1>Like many colleagues around the world, in the academic year 2020-21, it has become part of my responsibility as an educator to try to find ways to enhance what I will call the emergency online learning environment, both for our incoming undergraduate and postgraduate students and our existing student body.⁽¹⁾ And, as part of my thinking through how one might counter some of the difficulties of this emergency online learning environment, I have returned to the words of bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994): “to enter [the now virtual] classroom setting[] in colleges and universities with the will to share the desire to encourage excitement, [i]s to transgress” (7).

<2>In 2020-21, the very idea of sharing the desire to encourage excitement seems doubly transgressive. The question of how to motivate students to feel excitement for their studies when, as hooks writes, “[e]xcitement in higher education [is] viewed as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process,” combined with the less-than-ideal circumstances of emergency online learning and the potential that each and every student could be dealing with significant personal difficulties caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic, requires particularly delicate navigation of group dynamics (7, italics original). Now, more than ever, it is the case that “agendas ha[ve] to be flexible,” allowing for “spontaneous shifts in direction,” and students must “be seen in their particularity as individuals” (7). And yet, spontaneity is much more difficult to achieve in an online setting, and the particularities of students as individuals harder to ascertain via remote learning.

<3>My first-year undergraduate students had one week of socially distanced, masked, classroom discussion this academic year before we had to turn to what has been termed “online delivery” (Palloff and Pratt 38; King and Alperstein 50). And delivery is what it felt like in the first few weeks of Autumn 2020. Each Tuesday, I would turn on my camera and microphone and try to generate that all-important excitement that “stimulate[s] serious intellectual and/or academic engagement,” but my students had webcams that didn’t work, temperamental microphones, bedrooms they were using as their workspaces and which they understandably didn’t want to share on camera, children who needed their attention, and myriad other reasons for only using

the chat function in response to the discussion topics I posed or remaining silent altogether (hooks 7). At the end of these first sessions, I came away from the seminar with the feeling that my attempts at transmitting excitement, introducing a collaborative spirit into the group, and fostering a budding collective learning community were failing. I was ‘delivering’ these seminars and my students were diligently turning up, but we were missing the dynamics of the physical classroom setting.

<4>As hooks presciently states in her 1994 work subtitled *Education as the Practice of Freedom*, “as a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence” (8). Without the physical classroom community, without the presence of expressive bodies, voices full of cadence, the task has become one of inventing coping strategies that will allow us to achieve some form of “learning community” despite the technological barriers between us. Not being able to rely on the more natural back and forth of vocal and gestural interaction is perhaps the biggest challenge. Adjusting to the new rhythm of me asking a question using my microphone and camera, and then waiting significantly longer than I would for a verbal response in a classroom, so that students have time to type and send their responses, has been reminiscent for me of my first year of teaching as a PhD student. I have had to learn anew not to fill the silence between posing a question and a student responding to it, with more explanation, rephrasing, or even by answering the question myself.

<5>To add an additional layer of irony to these early sessions full of silence and half-hearted chat-box comments, the name of the first-year undergraduate module I refer to throughout this piece is “Talking Texts.” And whilst it might be said that the function of all literary studies seminars is *talking* about *texts*, for this introductory module in particular, the course has been designed to give students a much-needed chance to acclimatize to university study and an opportunity to talk freely and openly about the challenges of transitioning to higher-level learning. This module enables students to adapt to the shift in learning practices from prior schooling (in which a teacher talks and students listen and raise hands to answer questions) to the more open-discussion model of the university seminar. The module is a year-long one and in the first semester is intended to complement the other modules taken by undergraduates studying English literature, or English literature in combination with another subject such as history, by not assigning a set reading schedule of texts but rather focusing on skills. This workshop-based format emphasizes group discussion facilitated by the tutor without a pre-assigned core text to focus on. Such a free mode of discourse is very different from the experience most students have had thus far, coming as they do from a school system that does not feature much student-autonomy, or what Jim Scrivener calls a “learner-centred approach” (108).

<6>As Scrivener reminds us:

Moving students from their familiar, obedient, non-decision-making role to one where they are consulted and their opinions are taken into account (and may actually change what is done or how it’s done) doesn’t necessarily come quickly or easily. They may feel nervous or uneasy if the teacher suddenly asks them to start thinking about questions that have never been asked before. If not approached carefully, they may feel that the teacher is lazy, or unskilled or abandoning them. The teacher has to train the class to start

reclaiming the power that their previous experience has trained them to relinquish. (110-11)

Therefore, although the first semester of “Talking Texts” had functioned in previous years—in the setting of the physical seminar room—as more of a discussion forum, it became quickly apparent that this model would not work in the 2020-21 emergency online environment. Instead, and in keeping with Scrivener’s observations, without the physical and verbal cues of the in-person university seminar room, it has been important to guide students more gradually out of their previous non-decision-making roles and to help them acclimatize more gradually still to the expectations of university learning and teaching. To scaffold this change, each week, we put in place a set of prepared exercises (such as the writing of a blog post on the transition from prior learning to university-level courses) for the students to be able to refer to in our live, virtual sessions. This change in structure began the work of establishing a space where students could feel comfortable enough with their new peers to share their reflections on a given topic and to collaborate with each other in discussion. To overcome some of the other difficulties produced by our virtual classroom, the students and I developed a set of “coping strategies” as a cohort, which I will now go on to discuss.(2)

Coping Strategies

<7>These coping strategies, as I am referring to them, can be deemed as such because they respond to the specific context of the emergency online classroom and the situation variables found therein. They contrast with what teachers, students, and administrators alike might consider to be “normal” practices for campus-based teaching.(3) These strategies manifest in some explicit, and openly discussed, ways, and in some more implicit ways, perhaps not even operating at a level of group consciousness. This second category of coping strategy—the implicit—has only become apparent upon reflection that what my students and I are doing is, in fact, employing coping strategies. Nevertheless, each strategy is worthy of consideration and indeed celebration as it demonstrates that the student groups are working with me to create that all-important classroom community.

Strategy 1: Early Arrival and Informal Conversation

<8>The first strategy my students and I have employed is just such an implicit approach, and something I myself didn’t realize was a strategy until I began to notice increasing numbers of students joining the class early each week with the knowledge that I, and other students, would be online fifteen minutes before the class is due to start. In this time, before the “official” learning is due to begin, we simply chat: sometimes about the weather; once, about the popular role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons (a student had been in a tournament over the weekend and the rest of us had questions about how that worked in a virtual environment); another time, we debated tea versus coffee. The topics are often trivial, the conversation light, but importantly, it is *not* about the subject of that week’s seminar. Each small bonding session (as I have come to think of them) allows the students to reveal a little more about their personalities and to engage each other in ways that the online seminar itself makes more difficult.

<9>Sometimes, these informal conversations set the stage for particularly generative class-time conversations. The tea-versus-coffee discussion, for instance, established an energetic atmosphere for our examination of Kate Chopin's 1893 short story "Doctor Chevalier's Lie." The Great Beverage Debate, which was instigated entirely by the students who created the—albeit entirely jovial—opposition themselves, had more fervor and importantly, enthusiasm, than many of the debates I'd helped students stage in a seated classroom setting in all my years of teaching. Here was the excitement that hooks writes about in *Teaching to Transgress*, and we found it through what hooks refers to as a "deconstruction of the traditional notion that only the professor is responsible for classroom dynamics" (8). The stakes were low, and the terms of our debate were frivolous, but the discussion of Chopin that followed was one of the most productive seminars of the semester in terms of group participation and the vibrancy of the discussion that took place. "Excitement," hooks emphasizes, "is generated through collective effort," and the excitement and collective effort were palpable despite our remote learning environment (8). After this class, I received several emails from students thanking me again for the session and expressing how much they enjoyed it. This spontaneous follow-up contact stemmed directly, I believe, from the energy and rapport built-up prior to and then during the seminar, in which students had engaged in genuine back and forth with each other in relation to a literary text, rather than the more typical, stilted format of responses that follow a question posed by the tutor and that aren't necessarily part of a reciprocal debate.

Strategy 2: Breakout Groups

<10>The second strategy we have employed as a collective is to use the "breakout group" function of our online learning platform, Blackboard. Each week, I place two-to-three members of the larger seminar group (fifteen or sixteen students in total) into smaller groups for short activities that allow the students to work on a one-on-one or near one-on-one basis with each other, which suits students who find it more difficult or intimidating to speak (or type) to the full seminar group on screen. Early on in the first semester it became apparent that those students who had access to a microphone and a camera would turn them on if working in this way. The shift in dynamics from the main module virtual "room" to the more intimate setting of talking to one or two peers at most is transformative for some students who feel far more comfortable using their cameras if only doing so with one or two people at once.⁽⁴⁾ I have kept a list of who has worked with whom thus far in these smaller groups during the semesters and have been transparent with the students about my aim to ensure that they get the chance to work closely in this way with every other student in the class by the end of each semester.

<11>That the students continue to consistently use their cameras in these small groups and pairings, but not in the main virtual space, indicates that our understanding of the circumstances in which students feel comfortable using their cameras and microphones, as opposed to only the chat function, is still limited. The internet is flooded at the moment with articles such as "Face Value: Why Won't Students Turn Their Cameras on?"; "5 Reasons to Let Students Keep Their Cameras off during Zoom Classes"; and "Should Showing Faces Be Mandatory?"⁽⁵⁾ But little has been written yet about the fact that even within one online session, if it includes different learning methods and discussion styles, student behavior in relation to camera and microphone use is not static. As I have communicated to my students regularly, my pedagogical position on the subject of cameras—on or off—is that if they feel comfortable using them, I welcome that,

but students should not, indeed they cannot, be made to use their cameras. My more persistent plea has been for students to use their microphones, and this is more successful with one seminar group than the other.

<12>At the end of the first semester I conducted a Blackboard poll to collect feedback and to ascertain whether students wanted to continue using break-out groups in Semester Two. The results were as follows:

Group 1	Yes	No	No response/or absent
Would you like to continue using breakout groups for activities in semester 2?	11	2	2

Table 1. Polling results for Group 1 seminar about breakout room preferences.

Group 2	Yes	No	No response/or absent
Would you like to continue using breakout groups for activities in semester 2?	10	3	3

Table 2. Polling results for Group 3 seminar about breakout room preferences.

As the response was predominantly in favor of these breakout groups, I have continued to use them in most weekly sessions. These small breakout group sessions are usually ten-to-twelve minutes long, or sometimes if they are a quick brainstorming activity they can be as short as five or seven minutes. The students are set a task and then split off into their smaller groups. I always tell them how much time they will have in these smaller groups and provide a further one-minute warning via the “everyone” chat channel that the break-out groups are ending before closing them and returning the students to the main virtual space.⁽⁶⁾ This warning is in itself a coping strategy, born out of the experience that a student could be mid-sentence in their small-group discussions when the breakout spaces are closed. Such an occasion can have a jarring or an unsettling effect on the student when they realize they are suddenly speaking to the whole group again, an experience that could cause embarrassment and anxiety. Similarly, this warning gives students the time they need to turn their cameras and microphones off before re-entering the main virtual space, as seems to be their preference.

Strategy 3: “Ask Anything”: A Protected Space for Questions

<13>The third coping strategy we employ as a group is to leave dedicated time (within the scheduled hour) at the end of each session for students to ask me, and perhaps more significantly each other, any questions. By *any* questions, I don’t mean just those pertaining to the subject of that seminar’s discussion; students could do this at any point during the seminar. This five-minute period is a protected space that allows students an equal opportunity to pose wider questions about university study; to ask about where on the university website they can access certain resources they haven’t been able to find for one reason or another; to check with each other about upcoming assignment deadlines and reading tasks (and again, this discussion doesn’t necessarily have to relate to the module “Talking Texts”); to share tips or ideas about how they

are coping with the isolation and strange studying conditions of 2020-21; and, on more than one occasion, to recommend TV shows, films, and books to each other. Just as with Strategy 1, these final five minutes are another form of breathing space that we look forward to as a brief moment without any form of learning imperative for the students, or pedagogical pressure for me. The sum total of these twenty minutes at the beginning and end of each session are, I now believe, as important as the work we do developing critical thinking and response skills in the main portion of the weekly workshops. As a result of this “ask anything” space and the other coping strategies (formal and informal), the students have gotten to know each other better, have gone on to form social media groups and friendships outside of the virtual seminar, and are engaged, each week, in lively discussion that is a pleasure to facilitate.⁽⁷⁾ By the end of the academic year we may well have invested in some more collaborative coping strategies, or dispensed with others that are no longer necessary, but, in keeping with the impetus behind such strategies, it is important that we remain reactive and alert to the need for changes when they occur.

<14>Throughout *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks promotes the idea that the “engaged voice” of the teacher “must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself” (11). In new and challenging ways, the COVID-19 pandemic has made more urgent than ever this idea of the engaged voice of the teacher as never fixed, but ever responsive, changing, and evolving in dialogue with students and other teachers. It has made more visible the limitations but also the possibilities of technology and the virtual-learning environment; those of us both teaching and learning have gained new insights into how online teaching tools intersect with wider societal issues, and even global concerns. Teaching methods and voices must, therefore, be continuously adaptive, but the classroom remains “the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (12). To engage, to excite, and to work collaboratively with students is fundamental to their learning.

Notes

(1)I use the term “emergency online learning” to distinguish between the shift to online for modules that were intended for classroom delivery and teaching that is expressly developed to be delivered online.^(^)

(2)“Coping” is defined by *The Oxford Handbook of Stress, Health and Coping* as the process by which individuals “mitigate the harmful effects of stress” (Folkman 3-11, 4). Coping strategies, according to scholars in the field of psychology, can be divided into two categories: those that are oriented towards problem solving and those that are oriented toward regulating emotional distress. See Folkman et al., particularly p. 993.^(^)

(3)Coping strategies emphasize change rather than stability. Analysis of them is concerned with not what a person *normally* does, but how they adapt to recognizably altered, or evolving scenarios: such as the COVID-19 pandemic induced online environment. See Folkman et al.^(^)

(4)Anecdotally, across the sector, during the pandemic, it seems that more and more students are asking that seminars be recorded. As a result, those of us teaching might assume that some reluctance from students to use their cameras and microphones stems from this fact. Thus, the fact that students *will* use them in break-out groups might be attributed to the relative feeling of

freedom of knowing that, in Blackboard, break-out groups are not recorded. However, in spite of my giving them the option, the students in my “Talking Texts” sessions have not requested that our seminars be recorded, and so they aren’t. This means that we cannot draw a direct correlation between their willingness to use cameras in small groups, and not in the main virtual seminar space, based on recording (for later playback) alone.(^)

(5)See Harvey, Moses, and Reed.(^)

(6)Using the chat feature in Blackboard, if you send a message via the “everyone” channel, this will be seen by all breakout groups. Students get no automatic warning that their breakout group is ending so providing a warning via the “everyone” chat channel before you end the groups can mitigate some of the awkwardness of the fact that they may be mid-sentence and still talking when the main group is re-established.(^)

(7)While others may have different experiences, this return to an “unofficial” space does not typically result in silences, or impatience to move on to the next thing. The students are often only too keen to talk about what they’ve been watching, reading, or engaging with online, especially if I invite recommendations. Some weeks, if an assessment-deadline looms, it can serve as a cathartic space for venting anxieties and frustrations.(^)

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