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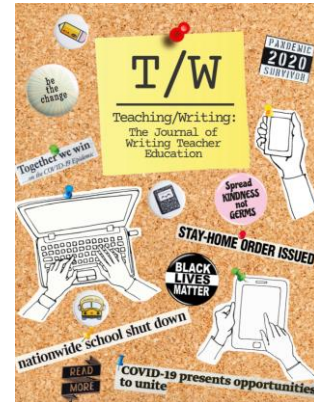
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Keeping Things Going: Reflections on Teaching “Teaching Writing” Online



Emily S. Meixner, *The College of New Jersey*

What does it mean to “keep things going online” in an undergraduate teacher education course on teaching writing? As I sat and stared at my spring syllabus considering how I might reimagine the class for the second half of the semester, I remember saying to myself: “We can still do most of this. We can still get most of this done.” The week prior, I’d said virtually the same thing to my department chair and Dean as I was composing a document explaining how I planned to transition to online instruction. I wish I’d kept what I wrote. I’m pretty sure I naively used the words “seamless” and “natural” in that narrative.

The class I teach, “Teaching Writing,” is one of two required methods courses in the secondary English education program at the small public liberal arts college in New Jersey where I work. Typically, this course is the first English-specific methods course students take in the program (after courses on adolescent psychology, educational foundations, and an introduction to special education) and it is housed in the English department as am I. In the class, students are introduced to “a variety of student-centered methods for teaching writing” and are required to “keep a writer’s notebook, familiarize [themselves] with and compose in a variety of genres, develop genre-based writing lessons and a writing unit, assemble a portfolio in which [they] showcase and reflect upon [their] written work, and articulate [their] own instructional vision” (course syllabus). In practice, what this means is that they’re introduced to genre-based writing workshop structure and pedagogy (including in-context grammar instruction), they create a calendar and teach lessons from a writing unit of their own design, and they develop a multi-genre portfolio of their own compositions which includes a “This I Believe” essay about writing. They also do a lot of thinking about and reflecting on their own history and experiences as writers.

When I teach the course in person during the semester, it has a certain kind of rhythm to it. The class meets for three hours every Monday evening and we always begin with an agenda and a writer’s notebook task or reflection. This is typically followed with a discussion of the day’s assigned reading or a paired/small group sharing and discussion of the assigned writing task. Once we have explored ideas in the reading or given and received feedback on each other’s writing, I then teach several mini-lessons relevant to the work the students need to accomplish next: identifying mentor texts, writing in a particular genre, brainstorming the lesson sequence of a writing unit, writing a lesson plan, designing writing assessments, or giving feedback and student work, for example. The semester ends with two or three sessions in which they teach one or two mini-lessons from their genre units to

each other. The three hours are interactive, practical, and intended to build students confidence and competence as writers and future teachers.

As we transitioned to our online class, I informally surveyed the students asking them about structure. They wanted to keep some of the course synchronous, but the thought of spending three straight hours online together, they admitted, was unrealistic for a variety of reasons including time of day, digital fatigue, and family and computer circumstances. Together we decided to continue to meet each week for about an hour, sometimes slightly longer if necessary, and to supplement the face-to-face instruction with asynchronous work on my part as well as theirs. My job was to provide instruction and feedback via screencasts, written comments, and video-recordings. Their job was to work independently on their individual assignments, but also occasionally provide written or video feedback on each other's lessons.

As it turned out, we were able to do most of the work for the course, but it wasn't seamless or natural, there were struggles and successes, and it was much harder to sustain the community of writers and teachers we were becoming when we were on campus.

What Seemed to Work

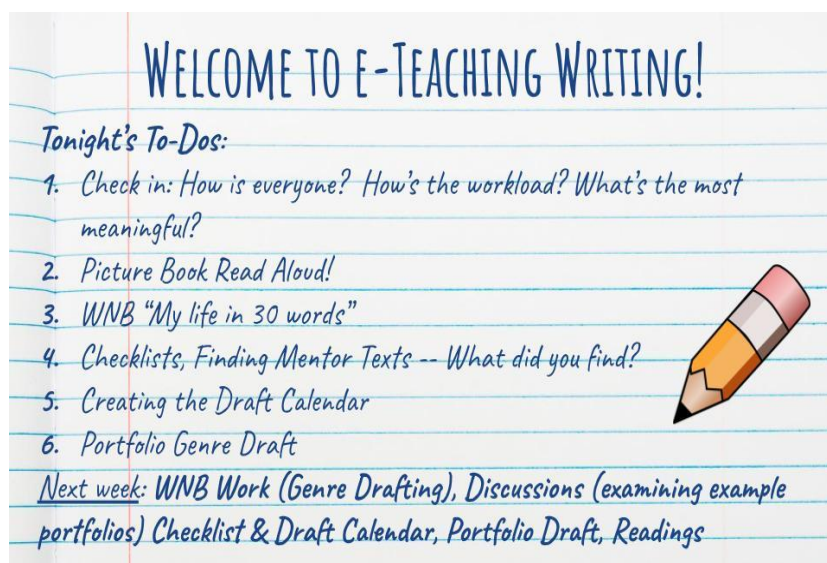


Figure 1: A sample agenda from the course after we transitioned online

Structure

As much as I could, I tried each week to continue the instructional rhythm of the course: the agenda, the WNB (writer's notebook) work, the readings, and the mini-lessons. I wanted it to feel, to whatever degree possible, like we were still working toward shared personal and professional goals. However, because we were only meeting for an hour, I decided to prioritize the notebook work, writing modeling, and assignment clarification when we were together as a full class. As a result, many of the discussions we would have

had in class took place asynchronously in the discussion module in Canvas, the learning management platform purchased by my college.

To facilitate our learning, every week before we gathered together, I sent a google doc to all of my students that included an agenda for that evening (see fig. 1), links to any materials we might be looking at together, instructional supports for the mini-lesson(s) I planned to teach, and directions for upcoming assignments. In their written feedback to me at the end of the semester, many students commented on these agendas, noting their utility during class as well as throughout the week as they were completing each week’s tasks. “I really liked having an agenda to work from because I knew where the class was going,” wrote one student. Similarly, shared another, “The agenda to work from was great, because this class definitely has a lot of moving parts. Seeing everything laid out helped with not only following along but keeping up with everything as well.” They also appreciated the synchronous, but abbreviated class schedule. “I felt like online instruction being only for an hour really worked well,” a student commented. “We were still able to get what we needed!” A second student agreed, writing, “It really helped me that we all met at the same time every week. It made me feel more stable and connected.” Over and over they indicated that having a regular schedule, seeing each other, and knowing concretely what was expected of them were characteristics of the course they most valued once we transitioned online.

The Writer’s Notebook

In terms of the course’s writer’s notebook requirements, I asked the class whether or not they thought they’d be able to maintain the WNB expectations I’d outlined for the first half of the semester (see table 1).

Writing Expectations	Reading Expectations
Five entries a week (sometimes specified by me, sometimes self-determined choice entries)	Notes on three pieces of writing (possible mentor texts). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a short essay from <i>Breakfast on Mars and 37 Other Delectable Essays</i> • any article from the New York Times • and a text of their own choosing

Table 1. Writer’s Notebook Expectations

I was surprised (shocked, actually) when they said they could and wanted to continue their independent reading and writing; virtually all of the students still had access to class texts and many students indicated they were already reading the news every day and wanted to use their WNBs to either escape or write about what they were experiencing. They also wanted to use their WNBs to brainstorm ideas for their genre unit.

To support their work, we continued to open class by drafting together in our WNBs and sharing our writing with each other. On the first night of online instruction, we wrote and shared drafts of “Our Lives in 30 Words.” On other nights, we created blackout poems, we wrote from poems and mentor (“Writer’s Secret”) sentences, and we brainstormed ideas

for our “This I Believe...About Writing” essays. When we ran out of time for a particular writing activity or when I wasn’t able to model some writing as intended, I would follow up by posting a screencast in our Canvas course (see figure 2) of myself composing or in Flipgrid (see below in Lesson Teaching).

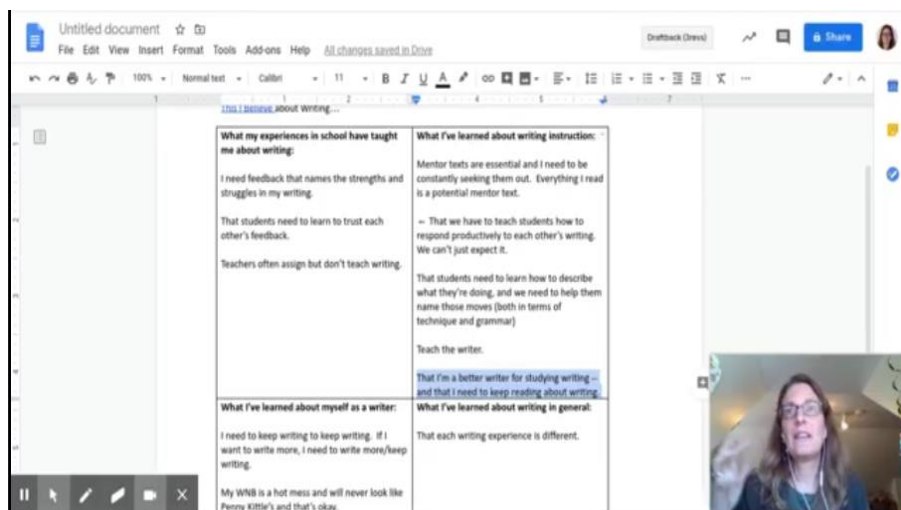


Figure 2: An example screencast of me thinking aloud my drafting of my “This I Believe...About Writing” essay.

At mid-semester, students expressed enthusiasm for the ways in which we used the writer’s notebooks, so I asked them at the end of the semester if they had continued to find them valuable. They did. “I found that sitting down, reading a few short articles, and then doing a writing piece altogether is a great routine that I developed this semester,” a student explained. “It makes me feel like I can work independently--the reading and writing feed into each other. No lie, I will be continuing this after class is over.” While they admitted struggling in the last few weeks with the choice options for their WNB entries and to feeling generally overwhelmed, they also appreciated having their notebooks as a constant place to play, vent, practice, and reflect. Wrote, one student: “[The} Writer’s Notebook was one of my favorite college assignments ever.”

Lesson Teaching

One of the aspects of the course that I struggled most with this spring was the lesson sharing that always happens in the last weeks of class. As students write mini-lessons for the genre unit they’re building, it is essential that they have an opportunity to teach and receive feedback on them from me and their classmates. For many students, the course itself doesn’t feel real until they see the planning they’ve envisioned enacted with a partner, a small group of their peers, or the entire class. In previous years, depending on course enrollment, I’ve had students teach 15-20 minutes mini-lessons in each of these configurations, often first with a partner, then with small groups, and then, if there’s time, I’ll ask for volunteers to teach the entire class. With the significant reduction in time spent

together, I just couldn't see how we could enact these lessons as intended, but I desperately wanted students to have some kind of teaching experience.

The solution we arrived at wasn't perfect, but it did allow students to feel like they'd engaged in some real instruction and learned from each other's lessons. Rather than teaching in person, students were asked to develop two different kinds of digital mini-lessons: a short 5-minute screencast using Screencastify on a grammar-related issue they anticipated they would see in student writing and a longer 10-minute writing mini-lesson from their genre unit they would record using the new screencasting option in Flipgrid (see figure 3). They were also expected to watch and comment (using Flipgrid's video feedback option) on at least two of their classmates' lessons. Both assignments students appreciated, again noting them in their course evaluations. "Flipgrid rocks! The video feedback was great. I'm so self-conscious over my work and, considering our isolation, seeing video feedback really warmed my heart," wrote one student. Another student who was enrolled in a second methods class (with a clinical component) also commented that "I really loved being introduced to Screencasts. I made one for every lesson that I taught my students for online teaching and they have been so helpful."

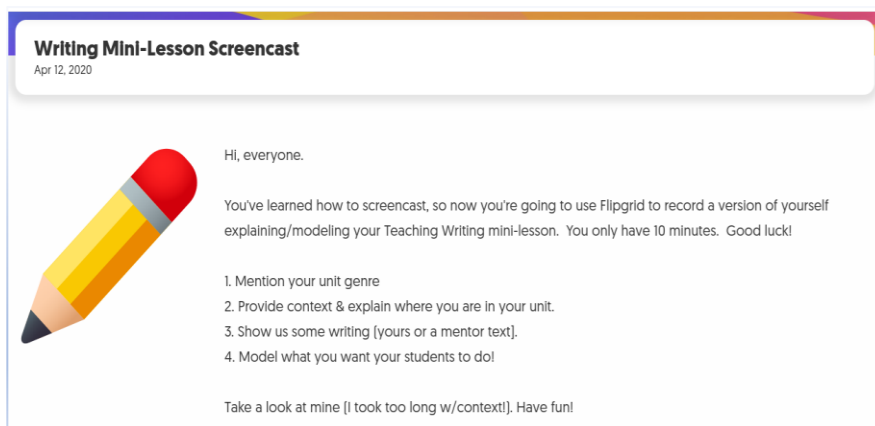


Figure 3: My directions for the students' Flipgrid lessons

Unsure of whether or not students would want to try teaching their lessons to the entire class, I offered it as an option. Most students declined, but two volunteered and it worked better than I'd hoped. "I loved seeing H's and J's lessons, I really enjoy seeing my classmates teach! You guys did a great job!" one student said. Several others agreed, writing, "I would've loved to see more live lessons" and "[I] would have liked to see more lessons because it was great to see how different lessons can be taught (I'm guilty of not volunteering so this is also my fault)." In retrospect, I wish I'd given more time to this. Knowing what I now know, I could have easily created breakout rooms in Zoom for students to teach their lessons to each other in real time.

Portfolio Sharing

In lieu of a final exam, students typically spend the designated exam period sharing their final portfolios by choosing a piece they want to read and talk about with their classmates. Because our exam time was scheduled nearly two weeks after the course concluded and students told me they were emotionally and intellectually exhausted, I asked them if they still wanted to share portfolios in celebration of their work. Enough students responded affirmatively, so we decided to schedule the event but make it optional, rather than required as it had been in the past.

On the night of the sharing, I was thrilled as my students' faces began to appear online. Half the class attended (8 students) and as many of them shared their portfolios using the screen sharing feature in Google Meet, we had rich conversations about their writing, their portfolios, their writer's notebooks, and about the need for community as people, as writers, and as teachers (see figure 4). Even though we were online, it still felt celebratory and I was moved by the care and commitment the students showed toward the class and each other.

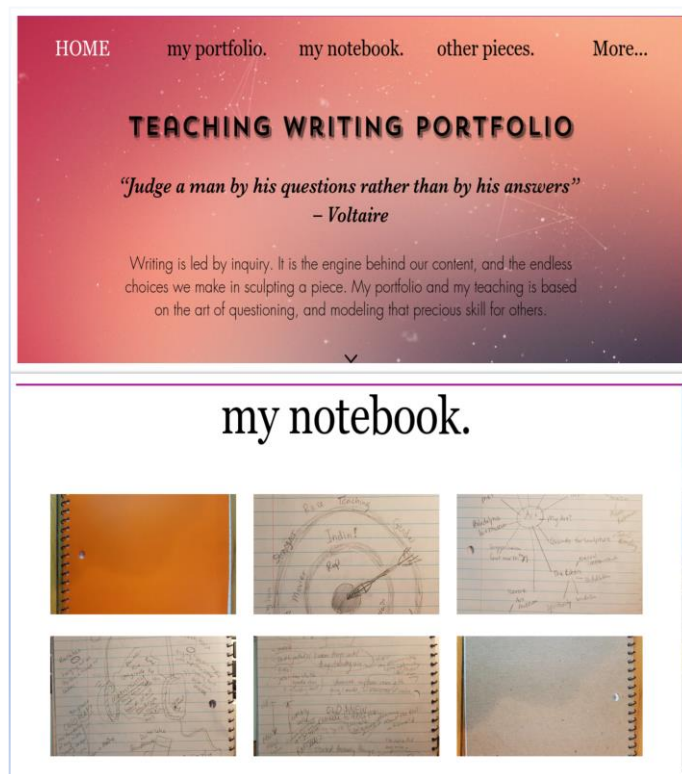


Figure 4: Snapshots from a student's final Teaching Writing portfolio

Looking Ahead

Although the students were affirming and, I think, honest in their feedback about what was and wasn't useful in the latter half of the semester, and although we made it work together, my mind lingers on the students who came to class, but whose faces I couldn't see and whose voices I didn't hear as often, many of whom also didn't attend the portfolio sharing. Even though those students were communicating with me regularly via email and Canvas and indicated that they appreciated my written and video feedback on their writing and planning, I continue to wonder what else I might have tried to enfold them into the class. I think they "got" course content and were committed to doing the work, but I wonder if this had more to do with who we were in the first half of the semester than what we did in the second half. I just don't know.

And, as I think about the importance of establishing community and developing student teachers' identities as writers to the success of this course, I wonder if the stop-gap strategies that seemed to work for us as we transitioned online this semester will be as effective in the fall when I have students I haven't yet met or worked with in person. Many of the strategies I've described, I'll continue to use, but the questions persist: what else can I and what else should I do?

Of all the changes we made and tools we tried this semester, the most important lesson I learned, and the one I must not forget even if we return to campus in the fall, was to let my students guide me in my decision making. Communicating with them about their needs was critical. The success of the course was fundamentally tied to their investment in it, and soliciting their feedback and providing them space to take part in its transformation, I hope, allowed us all to grow as teachers and writers.

Works Cited

Wolf, Brad and Rebecca Stern. (2013). *Breakfast on Mars and 37 Other Delectable Essays: Your Favorite Authors Take a Stab at the Dreaded Essay Assignment*. Roaring Book Press.