A Department Responds to COVID

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Introduction

In his work *The Culture of Calamity*, Kevin Rozario explains that "it is conventional, and by no means inappropriate, to think of disasters in strictly negative terms, but calamities have often presented opportunities" (3). This idea applies especially to learning environments. As Erika Christakis has recently written, "For all its challenges, the pandemic presents an opportunity to rethink school entirely" (22). Following the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, the rapidity with which faculty members and students were asked to adapt to new modalities was unprecedented and not without difficulties. At the same time, opportunities presented themselves in the midst of the chaos and confusion. Our ambition in this essay is not quite so great as Christakis might prefer, as each of of the contributors to this collectively-authored essay, faculty from the English and Language Studies Department at Indiana University Kokomo, reckon with the challenges and opportunities presented to our pedagogy and research by the COVID-19 pandemic. While our individual thoughts might address a specific environment (an individual classroom, or college writing center, for example), they amount to something more substantial, a constellation of ideas demonstrating how faculty imagine moving forward and rethinking their ideas in the midst of chaos.

"The World is Still Out There...We're Ready to Find It" *by Karla Farmer Stouse*

According to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, "Students need to be equipped with the skills, flexibility, and attitudes required to navigate amid uncertainty, to see change as an opportunity rather than a threat." For our students, 2020 became a thrown-into-the-deep-end crash course in improvised adaptation to develop those traits. This jarring culmination of the semester came after a promising start celebrating Indiana University's Bicentennial, when most weeks offered multiple special events—free tickets to a presentation by actor/activist Viola Davis, field trips, plans to bring Nikki Giovanni to our campus, several giveaways and student-led activities, and increased focus in every department to incorporate high-impact practices for all students. Campus life was vibrant. All was well.

The ten students chosen for The Innovation Symposium were awarded a Bicentennial Grand Expedition trip grant and travel scholarships covering expenses for three weeks in England. Like their 95 predecessors, they would study innovation and develop projects to address global issues locally. Knowing this would be my tenth and last IS trip gave students a greater sense of purpose and expectation. They bonded as a team of forward-thinkers on an adventure challenging them beyond any previous classroom experience. Only a few had been on an airplane or out of America. They overflowed with enthusiasm, eager to become the finest IS group. And then…

Optimism for moving our trip to late summer evaporated as the coronavirus spread. If life were a case study, it might have been clinically intriguing to watch these high-achievers work through losing this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Instead, it was excruciating. All I could offer was a virtual version of our trip, creating a sense of the experiences of learning to navigate the London Underground or picking up trash on a Cornish beach or developing new uses for a derelict Midlands village hall.

I called for assistance: friends in England who meet with IS groups plus previous IS participants to mentor students as we traveled online. I developed each virtual day to mirror our in-country travels, discussions and activities, including navigation in London ("Which is the best route to get to the Guild Hall from our hotel?"). Virtual tours provided glimpses of our sites--the British Museum, subterranean farm Growing Underground, the Eden Project, Chatsworth, etc. The environmental focus of this year's trip fostered research and problem-solving of environmental issues in London's East End, on Cornwall's coast, and in the Midlands. Students planted their own gardens in conjunction with our Eden studies. We examined the ethos of organizations such as Eden and Chatsworth to assess their value in addressing environmental issues, expanding "environmental" to include lifestyles and community-building.

Our British friends provided activity back-up and lively Zoom discussions. Our Londoners shared the history of the East End and the Olympic site. Our innkeeper/press officer for the Royal Navy photographed trash on Looe's beach, allowing us to analyze its origination and determine ways to prevent subsequent littering. Our Wiltshire friends discussed reclamation of treasures in their work of finding and selling Victorian bottles. Our Grantham friends provided insights about business decline and complicated impacts that changes to the derelict village hall could have on villages elsewhere. We visited local pubs and cafes, where students ordered unfamiliar foods and calculated meal costs in dollars. They received a box of British items, including teas. The course was as comprehensive as possible.

And it broke their hearts. Each online experience reminded them that an imitation is not an actual experience--no crowding into an Underground car, no burrata with figs

at Spitalfields Market, no close examination of the Parthenon Marbles to decide who owns them, no ramble through the mists of Eden's Rainforest Biome, no getting lost trying to find Harlaxton Manor's Great Hall. It was a significant learning moment for me, a difficult truth that the impact of high-impact experience is not in the activity completion but in the value students carry away.

Still, there were bright spots, especially the students' determination to continue and the special bonding shared challenges can nurture. Though the students are not ready to present their projects, they have developed important, scalable work that will improve their communities. They have also selected their contribution for our pay-forward activity to thank the campus—establishment of a planting area to support bird, pollinator, and firefly populations. These are not small achievements.

 For now, we wait with renewed optimism that 2021 will allow The Innovation Symposium 2020 to travel to England. Perhaps the extended wait and what we have already learned will make the experience richer and sweeter. I know it will for me.

"Traumatic Times and Traumatic Texts" *by Jim Coby*

As educators everywhere scrambled to reassess their pedagogies and reconfigure them to new modalities following the widespread dismissal from college campuses in the Spring of 2021, the concept of trauma-informed pedagogy became an increasingly necessary frame for developing assignments and classes. Trauma-informed pedagogy is not a necessarily new concept, and its central tenets exist, if latently, within most empathetic educators' instruction. As Butler and Carello note:

> to be *trauma-informed*, in any context, is to understand how violence, victimization, and other traumatic experiences may have figured in the lives of the individuals involved and to apply that understanding to the provision of services and the design of systems so that they accommodate the needs and vulnerabilities of trauma survivors. (156)

When planning a lecture or reading, many of us already consider the difficulties and tragedies a prototypical student may have experience. But an awareness of individual trauma is quite different than acknowledgement of mass trauma - especially when that trauma is sustained, ongoing, and being jointly experienced by both teacher and students alike. How, then, does one go about addressing traumatic concepts through literature while in the midst of global and localized traumas?

The first step in addressing joint trauma is acknowledging it, letting students know that it's perfectly fine to feel anxious, unprepared, discombobulated, and ill-at-ease in their studies. In fact, it's *normal*. The concept of normalcy, of highlighting to students

how imperative their self-care and appreciation of the traumas they experienced from March 2020 onward, deeply influenced the works I chose to populate my literature and literary theory courses during the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semesters. In particular, I believed it necessary that a portion of texts grapple with narratives of illness and racial justice.

Emily St. John Mandel's post-apocalyptic work *Station Eleven* proved an invaluable asset in addressing students' traumas. The text's plot, which felt all too apropos to our moment, revolves around a mysterious and rapidly acting influenza that decimates much of the world's population. Those left struggle with the basic necessities of survival, but that struggle is of little interest to Mandel, who instead focuses her narrative on the lives of survivors twenty years after the disease's major impact, specifically a peripatetic troupe of actors who believe, paraphrasing an episode of *Star Trek*, that "survival is insufficient" (119). Likewise, Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic Pulitzer Prize winner, *The Road*, follows a nameless man and child as they quest through a landscape of "eternal ash" (68) hoping to achieve some semblance of normalcy and safety upon reaching the Gulf Coast. At its heart, this novel considers the importance of interpersonal relationships as a means of maintaining sanity in times of duress. I chose these novels as they force students to confront issues in the culture and large and within their own lives; in particular, how does one handle the minutiae of day-to-day existence following the initial tumult and disruption of the events of March 2020? That is, once students learned how to wear facemasks properly, maintain social distance, and appropriately cleanse hands...then what? How did they find ways to maintain creativity, vitality, and happiness once the initial problems of survival had been solved?

Of course, COVID was not the singular mass trauma of 2020, and I felt it my responsibility to include texts that dealt with racial injustice as a mechanism for helping students reckon with the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless other victims of systemic racism. Richard Wright's memoir *Black Boy* and the second volume of John Lewis' recent graphic novel memoir *March* served as excellent catalysts in opening such a difficult subject up to students. Each text provided historical context and demonstrated how the violence African Americans experience today exists within a longer lineage of government sanctioned abuse. Lewis' text, in particular, proved effective. As graphic novels necessitate multiple literacies from their readers, students experienced not just Lewis' story, but they saw pictorial representations of his struggles, they felt the ontamontapeas of *CRACK* and *THWAP* when police batons were brought down on Civil Rights protestors, and they recoiled at images of historical violence juxtaposed against images from recent events. With each work, students gained insight into the roots of American injustice, while also witnessing the creative expressions which can blossom from such traumas.

As such, they found avenues and opportunities to discuss recent traumas that mirrored those in the text.

In designing my course readings lists with trauma-informed pedagogy in mind, I intended to provide outlets for students to address the most frightening and overwhelming circumstances they experienced over the past year. Students appeared to revel in this approach, as conversations were well-informed, thoughtful, and considerate of others.

"The Ellis Island of the University" *by Paul Cook*

The writing classroom has always been a messy place; that's part of the magic. English A, the first required composition course in America, was developed at Harvard in the 1880s to deal with the messy reality that most of Harvard's freshmen just weren't very good writers (Berlin 60-61; Brereton 11-13). Composition courses are messy primarily because writing is messy, but also because students come to college with their preconceived notions about writing intact, their intellectual deficits, their hang-ups about school (and schooling), and often a crippling sense of self-doubt. Amid an ocean of uncertainties, the required composition course rises to greet them, like a curricular Statue of Liberty: messy in the best way, happily unpredictable, teeming with ideas and voices and abilities from all over the map.

Writing teachers knew in their bones that 2020 was going to be different. Masks, students spaced six feet apart, half of the class online and half in person—this was uncharted territory. Regimented into neat little Zoom squares and segregated by six feet of CDC-mandated distancing, students would be locked into a kind of military precision. How then to maintain the essential messiness of the composition classroom and its kairotic potentials while keeping students engaged via screens and in stilted classroom environs?

As the WPA, or Writing Program Administrator, at my institution, these were the anxieties I heard—and felt—most often from faculty. The pandemic had exposed the fault lines in our pedagogies, just as it had exposed the socio-economic and racial dynamics of society's infrastructures of healthcare and work. As social epidemiologist Nancy Krieger puts it, the COVID-19 pandemic is "pulling a thread" connecting patterns of inequality in public health, housing, and labor conditions (qtd. in Chotiner). In the process, it exposes just how much work we have left to do, in society as well as education.

I realized we could no longer view the physical classroom meeting space as the default scene for composition teaching and learning; however, for most of our incoming students and many of our writing faculty, fully-online, asynchronous

composition courses just weren't an option, particularly on such short notice. For many of our brand new students, the composition classroom is where they learn to be college students: having discussions, sharing ideas with others, getting into arguments, collaborating on writing and research projects. Some students wouldn't take the online portion of the HyFlex courses as seriously as the face-to-face meetings. Many would struggle with Zoom's intrusiveness and social flattening. As organizational behaviorist Gianpiero Petriglieri so aptly puts it:

> Imagine if you go to a bar, and in the same bar you talk with your professors, meet your parents or date someone, isn't it weird? That's what we're doing now… We are confined in our own space, in the context of a very anxiety-provoking crisis, and our only space for interaction is a computer window. (qtd. in Jiang)

Students in my own courses voiced concerns about feeling "watched" when participating on Zoom, as if the levelling, come-as-you-are nature of the physical writing classroom had been lost in translation to the panopticism of the online space. Others were plagued by internet connection issues (or claimed to be), and were unable to meet regularly, while others seemed to view the Zoom sessions as an opportunity to catch up on sleep or Netflix.

My attempt to meet these challenges was to revise first-year writing on our campus in a way that capitalized on the best features of the half-online/half in-person "HyFlex" model. Recognizing the role that the online environment would play in students' peer review and feedback processes, I organized the course around a final "capstone" assignment: a digital portfolio project in which students would fully revise and refashion two major projects. The first major project was a podcast (with script) that asked students to connect a personal narrative to a larger social, political, or cultural issue, while the second project was a multimodal research project with a visual component presented extemporaneously to the class. Students performed at least two required revisions on each of the major projects, meeting with each other in small workshops and one-on-one with me both in class and in Zoom. The short writing assignments and "one-offs" we did fed directly into the two major assignments. The third major project—the final digital portfolio—asked students to fully revise their first two projects after having the chance to sit on them all semester, then transform them into online portfolios with an introductory reflection or preface. This way, students left the course with a practical collection of revised documents that, ideally, would represent both the culmination of their work in ENG-W 131 and some of their most polished written work to date.

While I can't (and won't) claim to have dealt with these issues perfectly, I did succeed in revising the required writing course with an eye to how interactive online texts would play a key role both in provoking engagement and building a sense of

community among students, while holding on to some of the best features of the physical classroom. Many of our students have yet to adjust socially to each other or to the norms of schooling, particularly to the bizarre rituals of higher education (Crain), and writing classes conducted virtually offer students a convenient escape from the requisite messiness of the writing classroom. In other words, students in first-year writing courses learn far more than how to write an analysis paper or cite sources in textbook-perfect MLA format. They learn how to think, share ideas, express opinions, and form community. Composition is the Ellis Island of the college experience and the writing classroom is its Great Hall: symbol of opportunity, social gathering space, bureaucratic processing center, and literacy boot camp, all rolled into one. Composition meets student writers where they are by drawing them out of their intellectual and physical comfort zones and into the sheer messiness of writing, invention, and the clanging cacophony of being together.

"Teaching in Dark Times" *by Eva Roa White*

In her chapter, "Teaching Literature in Dark Times," Elaine Showalter's first sentence poses the question, "What should teachers do in the classroom in times of crisis, disaster, tragedy, sorrow and panic?" (132). Her question applies both to students and teachers, as she acknowledges that we all will at one time or another face personal and different public crises during our teaching career. She brings up the point that we are not really trained to deal with these circumstances and that "the bland contemporary material on the ethics of teaching avoids really difficult circumstances" (132). She concludes that "the event produces the desire to communicate, and insofar as we are able, we should go with that desire and facilitate it for a short while" (139).

When the pandemic hit in March of 2020, this advice did not immediately come to mind, though I had taught Showalter's Teaching Literature to a graduate class of students seeking certification to teach English in college in 2018. By June 2020, however, a few months into our new world of quarantines, masks, and social distancing, when the Black Lives Matter movement was growing across the world, Showalter's words resonated with me loud and clear. What could I do to address this in the classroom? I am no stranger to these issues. I routinely focus on identity, belonging, and race in my literature classes. I have even team-taught a course on plagues with colleagues from different disciplines, but this time it was personal. The plague had come for me, my loved ones, and my students. In the Fall of 2019, while still recovering from a health issue that had me housebound for two years, I had just returned to teaching face-to-face and the joys of teaching on campus. In Spring 2020, after only one semester, all this was taken away as the pandemic evicted me from campus by placing me in the vulnerable category for COVID 19.

My response was to include Elaine Showalter's "Teaching Literature in Dark Times" amongst the readings in my "Teaching Literature in College" graduate online course the following summer. The discussions for this module were lively, as they allowed the students, most of them high-school teachers, to articulate their anxieties and experiences teaching during crises. Many of them focused on the current pandemic and civil rights movements. Their concern was to give students a way to navigate this world in crisis through empathy and understanding with open eyes and open hearts, and help bring out the humanity in all of us.

I also brought in a practical way for them to engage the current pandemic by including two timely poems in my "Teaching Poetry" module: "D.I.D. (Dissociative Identity Disorder)" by Ikysha Jones, a British poet who calls out the systematic racism in America by supporting the "Black Lives Matter" movement and "The Apocalypse" by Dr. Elizabeth Mitchell, a Boston E.R. physician's reaction to the pandemic from a personal and professional point of view. The students welcomed these poems and discussed how they could use them to engage the students in their poetry classes.

Emboldened by this initial success, I added two short story collections that address the concerns of the growing "Black Lives Matter" movement and the pandemic that was still raging by Fall 2020 to my online graduate class, "Identity and Belonging in the Contemporary International Short Story." *Friday Black*, written in 2018, by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's collection of short stories focuses on Black identity and institutional racism in a dystopian, consumerist America. While all of the students acknowledged the satire of his short stories was a well-founded critique of racist and consumerist America, some of them cringed at the violence of the social commentary.

Intimations by Zadie Smith, published in 2020, consists of essays written from the beginning of the pandemic until the death of George Floyd. Smith gives a personal view of the pandemic in this moment of racial reckoning and global health crisis. She tackles the nature and relativity of suffering and the need for human connection and compassion. The students responded to this collection in an emotional way. One, in particular, was impacted personally, as she had just found out that her husband had Covid-19 and needed to quarantine.

Including timely works in my courses helped my students to voice their anxieties about the crises we were facing in real time. It also reinforced our sense of remote, intimate community.

"Online Tutoring: There's More To It" *by Michelle Westervelt*

In the middle of the spring 2020 semester, the IU Kokomo Writing Center was forced to make an abrupt transition from face-to-face tutoring to synchronous, online sessions. This transition came one semester after we made the shift from basic record keeping to the WCONLINE scheduling system. We managed through the growing pains of using this new system for record keeping, but moving from all in-person appointments to fully online came with its challenges. Just as many instructors across the nation learned that there's more to online instruction than meets the eye, so, too, have tutors learned that there is more to online tutoring. Three concerns surfaced: One, tutors need more targeted training for tutoring online; two, it's critical to not only find ways to keep the tutors engaged with clients but with one another, so they feel the same sense of support and collaboration that they have on campus; and three, we need more outreach to get students through our virtual doors--we can't make appointments personal if students aren't scheduling them.

The tutors breezed through the logistics of conducting appointments in WCONLINE (using video/audio, text-chat, and editing features; guiding clients through scheduling and participating in online sessions; and entering notes), but we discovered online *administrative work* is much different than online *tutoring*. The tutors made a swift transition from face-to-face to online sessions. Additionally, many students continue to request text-chat sessions, so providing written feedback has become instrumental. Among other concerns, when providing written feedback, there can be the temptation to provide too much help, pushing the boundaries of our university editing policy. But when done properly, written feedback can be equally meaningful and productive. Gallagher and Maxfield touch on this in their digital edited collection for *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship,* suggesting that when transitioning from face-to-face to online tutoring, tutors need "strategies for offering structured, personalized, and supportive written advice—a process that might be unfamiliar to them." This has prompted an expansion in our training to provide guidance on *written* feedback, helping tutors attain more confidence tutoring online, filling the gap for students who prefer text-chat, and preparing for asynchronous online sessions in the future.

Although we've conquered the logistics of online consultations and will work toward more effective written feedback, building personal connections online remains difficult. Students were reluctant to use video, and text-chat sessions create a barrier in developing those connections. As Gallagher and Maxfield note, " distance education has always had a significant challenge in establishing a sense of co-presence: creating the perception that a student is not alone in the process, despite the fact that the student might not physically interact with another person." That

concern was shared by the tutors. Elizabeth Curtis, graduate student and tutor, describes it like this:

> . . . the hardest part about going online was the elimination of social queues from clients. I have primarily stuck to tutoring through the text chat as many clients don't want to mess with the video or voice chat. . . I haven't been able to read my clients and can't communicate to them through my body language or by physically pointing to portions of their papers. I think many people thought that going online would be a breeze with today's technology, but there's still so much value to having face-to-face appointments.

Although her sentiments are felt by us all, we will be online again this spring if not longer, so it is imperative we explore solutions to this problem.

An equally important concern with building personal connections is the lack of interaction between the tutors themselves. Jared Jackson, December 2020 graduate and former tutor, divulges his own feelings:

> As much as I am an introvert, I am still a social creature, and it surprised me how much "charge" my "social battery" derived from mundane work interactions. Naturally it took more effort to engage with clients online, but even things like *losing out on those forgettable shift-change small-talk interactions* deprived me of a social battery top-up that I never noticed until I didn't have it.

I share Jackson's position. When tutoring in person, on campus, tutors chat between shifts and share failures and successes at staff meetings, creating a sense of comradery. It's clear that we need to meet remotely more regularly to foster these relationships.

We can ponder how to connect with students and one another during these trying times, but to do our jobs, we need students to schedule appointments. Although I thought *more* students would utilize our center with the online option, the contrary has occurred. Fall 2019 we had over 300 appointments. Fall 2020, we had half that. This has given me pause. We spent time getting online tutoring set up, tutors trained, and proper equipment at home for them to use. We spoke with incoming students to help them register for accounts and get familiar with scheduling; however, we served far fewer students. Understandably, we had *fewer* appointments because students aren't on campus for drop-in sessions that make up a good portion of our traffic (as we are located in the library and easily accessible). But to have *half* the number of appointments? That was a shock.

We are brainstorming ideas for outreach, with the understanding that some challenges come with the current environment. The transition to WCONLINE was swift, but it has opened a door—not just during a pandemic, but for the future. We have the capacity to offer online tutoring synchronously and may consider asynchronous sessions if the demand arises. We look forward to exploring those opportunities, but right now our focus is on reaching students. We recognize the value of our services and are committed to assisting every student we can in the most effective way—whether online or in-person.

"Opening Up and Moving Forward" *by Lori Bruns*

When our campus was closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was midway through the semester's curriculum of my Z104 – Language in Our World linguistics course, a general education course fulfilling a diversity requirement for our students. None of my students were English majors. And, while a couple students genuinely wanted to learn more about the field of linguistics, most had only ended up sitting in my classroom because it fit their schedules and their advisors saw an opening.

Because general education courses are often filled with hostile participants, I designed this particular course with an eye for student input and engagement. I decided on a seminar-type course where students would be lectured briefly on a topic, placed into small groups, and then assigned a subtopic to gather more information to present to their classmates. The group members changed weekly so students experienced working with all of their classmates by the end of the semester.

This process worked well, for the most part, until the pandemic shut down our face-to-face courses on the campus. After a brief panic about how I was going to facilitate a presentation-heavy course in an online environment, and rather than moving to simple PowerPoint lectures and tests, I decided to use Zoom in a way I never had before – to put students into online groups, guide them in working together to share documents and collaborate on research, and eventually present their information, including slides and videos, to the rest of the class.

Despite having used Zoom for three years previously to meet with students in online conferences, I still had a learning curve in order to master the more advanced features I wanted to utilize in our new modality, and I faced challenges learning how to create breakout rooms, entering those same rooms once the students were assigned, and sharing videos with the audio through my laptop speakers. Colleagues, friends, and family members quickly became my test students as I prepared for the switch. Fortunately, I had one last face-to-face class period with my students before we closed up the campus, and we utilized that opportunity to the fullest extent. As

most of my students had never used Zoom, I set up a meeting and hosted a practice run in the classroom, even assigning them into breakout rooms so they were prepared for the process. I was delighted to hear the laughter throughout the session as my students experienced a new method of communication during a time of fear and isolation.

The following week tested everything we had learned and practiced. And despite technological challenges, something glorious was also happening in our remote classroom: students were actively learning, engaging, and collaborating. Students with former attendance issues were suddenly logging into the Zoom meetings each class period. Groups were finding new and creative ways to share their research with their classmates. But most importantly, my shy, quiet students were finally speaking up and offering input to class discussions. Baggio and Beldarrain note in *Anonymity and Learning in Digitally Mediated Communications: Authenticity and Trust in Cyber Education*:

> The success of online discussions and interactions hinges on the involvement, both cognitively and emotionally, of both instructor and students. The emergence of an online identity develops over time and is an integral part of learning online. The psychological aspects of the online environment augment certain traits in the individual while diminishing others. Some learners who would be too shy to raise their hands in the physical classroom, for example, may feel less inhibited in the online environment and participate more actively. (189)

As most college professors know, one of the more challenging aspects of class discussions can be engaging all of the students in the course at one point or another. Remote instruction can often be a way for those less-inclined to speak up and express their ideas and questions without the pressures that come from being in a face-to-face classroom.

Although our semester did not go according to the original plan, I would like to think we rose to the challenge and perhaps grew in our resolve to adapt, overcome, and seek creative ways to explore and learn. While the surprise of a complete cessation of face-to-face courses was not welcome, it was not without its rewards. My students took ownership of their learning, explored, created, and shared their thoughts and research in new ways using a tool they were previously unfamiliar with. Most importantly, all of my students participated, even those who normally would be content to sit back and let their classmates do all of the talking. And, this is all an educator can hope for.

"*Inspired* in a Pandemic" *by Kristen L. Snoddy*

The eight females enrolled in my Young Adult Literature in the Spring of 2020 seemed an unlikely combination to develop a bond. In short, they varied greatly in life experiences, lifestyle choices, economic status, and prior commitment to academics. Yet from early in the semester, their shared purpose was evident. They arrived for class prepared: often before I entered the classroom, they had realigned their desks to form our discussion circle. We engaged in conversations of varied works, ranging from Ray Bradbury's timeless *Fahrenheit 451* to more contemporary writings such as Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* and Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Students willingly shared their struggles with the texts and those they were facing in their personal lives, and I delighted in preparing for each class session and looked forward to their interpretations. Then the world-wide pandemic hit, and I panicked: *How will we sustain our cohesiveness?*

Following a university wide two-week break for course preparation, the class moved to the Zoom environment; to my excitement, the students did not relinquish their previously forged bond to the virtual environment. Not once was it necessary for me to encourage them to enable their cameras. They willingly shared their visages and their personal workspaces. As often occurs in teaching, students taught their instructor a memorable lesson—when the environment is conducive to an academic exchange of ideas and just as important a safe space, it can be *powerful*. In our case, not even a world-wide pandemic could impact what these students had created.

Equally remarkable to the bond these students developed and sustained even throughout the pandemic is the resourcefulness that they demonstrated in creating their semester projects, while essentially homebound and with little access to outside materials. They were granted quite a bit of leeway as the project could fall into one of three categories: Literature Trip (using Google Earth), Community Activist (via poster, flier, other), or Innovative Project. All projects had to be approved by the instructor and were required to represent a theme that arose from one or more of the required readings. The end products demonstrated the creative potential that was unleashed despite students' limited access to materials. I will highlight just two of these student projects.

Maryann, a frank and endearing adult student returning to the classroom after several years away, chose to imitate the illustrations by Ellen Forney in Alexie's graphic novel. In her own creative work, Maryann not only imitated Forney's illustrations but achieved near perfection in doing so and even went so far as to categorize her drawings as Forney does: intimate, quick jot and reflection.

LET ME TELL YOU
About THE
90's

Black lipstick
darker than
my soul
Her was smiling

Rebellious band
Tee

The Biggest Pockets
ever

JNCO Jeans.
The wider
The better

Black Combat
Boots At
All times

Chloe, often content to sit back and listen to our discussion, on more than one occasion impressed us with her insightful interpretations. Chloe describes the materials in her original artwork based on Bradbury's novel:

> I choose Fahrenheit 451 [*sic*] for my innovation project. I used pages from the New Testament to create this project. I ripped the pages out and rubbed ash and soot [from a grill] on the pages, and pictures. . . . I thought it was beautiful how the Bible and having faith could bring Montag to leave the blissful [sic] ignorant society he has grown accustomed to. It was when Montag started to rip the pages of the Bible and threatening to destroy it, that Faber agreed to help him. . . . Yes, Fahrenheit is about burning books, but really I think it embodies the idea of censoring not books, but knowledge, and reinforcing ignorance.
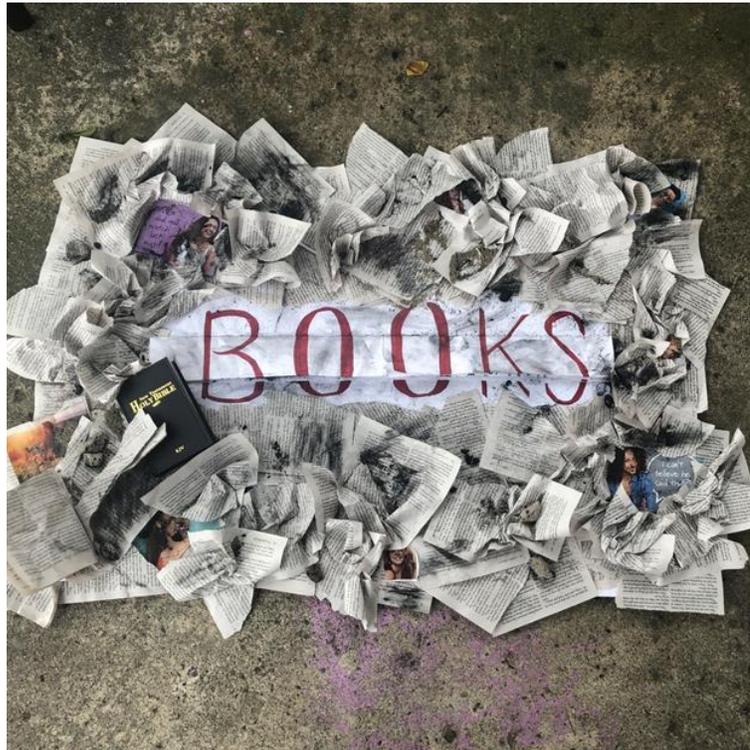
Despite having taught for over three decades and understanding key strategies in developing student to student and faculty to student cohesiveness, I am convinced these women deserve most of the credit for the bond they were able to sustain throughout the pandemic. To my point, the first-year students in my composition course—despite my best efforts—never developed a sense of cohesiveness neither before nor after the two-week break, and all were reticent to share their visages once

we moved to Zoom. As instructors we can set the stage for engagement; however, whether it takes hold or not is in the hands, and hearts, of the students. In addition, although I had the forethought to give students choices in selecting their project, I could not have predicted how both the time gained from being homebound and the simultaneous inconvenience of being less mobile to gather resources may have ironically contributed to the students' creative endeavors. Even, and perhaps especially, in a world-wide pandemic, these eight students were an inspiration.

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