**Silas Hansen | Beyond the Classroom Walls: Teaching Online Creative Writing**

My experiences as an online student were limited at best and atrocious at worst. I only took a couple of classes, both gen ed courses, and ended up failing both. The work was optional reading quizzes and required tests; there was nothing to ensure that I did the reading, that I was watching any lecture videos or reading the professor’s notes; there were no deadlines until the very end of the semester, either, so I ended up trying to cram 15 weeks’ worth of material into the final three days of finals week. I’m not blaming anyone but myself here, but my desire to teach online was pretty much zero.

However, I ended up having the need to do it. Although I teach in-person 99% of the time, my university’s student population disappears in the summer. Many of our students are first generation, are working class, are trying to finish college and cheaply as possible. Indiana’s legislature is also, like many states, pressuring our university to get students out in four years, which doesn’t leave a lot of space for exploring something new, for changing your mind, for adding a another major or minor.

At the same time, we have a huge creative writing program—nearly 200 undergraduate majors and even more minors—and students in telecommunications and English Education are also required to take creative writing courses. As a result, a lot of students need or want to take creative writing classes in the summer, but they can’t commit to a 5-week summer course that requires them to be there, in Muncie, for two hours per day, five days per week.

And so, I decided, with my department’s support and just a little bit of pressure, to offer a section of my 300-level creative nonfiction workshop online in the summers. There’s not a lot of demand for online classes during the school year, so I’m still teaching in person then, but have since taught it three times and will teach it for a fourth this summer. I should preface all this by saying that my experiences are anecdotal and I’m far from a formal researcher, but I’ve been really pleased with the ways that the class has worked.

I’ve had an average of 18 students in each of these online courses, comparable to my typical course offerings. Their course completion rate, as well as their average grades, are also comparable to the students in my typical course offerings. It’s not for everyone—some students really struggle with the online environment, just like I did—but for many students, it provides opportunities they wouldn’t normally have and allows them to more adequately balance family, work, social lives, and their academics—something I know Elane will be talking about in more depth. And although I don’t see myself teaching more than 1-2 online courses per year, I’ve ended up really enjoying it.

The best thing about teaching online for me, though, is that facing the challenge of teaching the material in an entirely different mode has forced me to really consider how I structure *all* of my courses.

Like many of you, I’m sure, I didn’t get a lot of formal pedagogical training; I took a two-week workshop on how to teach first-year writing during my MFA and that’s pretty much it. I’ve otherwise learned about pedagogy by watching, by taking classes myself and figuring out what does and doesn’t work. And, as a result, I replicated the workshop model—the Iowa model, as some folks call it—without thinking too much about *why* I was structuring my class this way. I realized pretty quickly that doing full-class workshops and simply talking about issues as they came up wasn’t going to work. So I started to think about what purpose that structure served, about what my students were getting out of it. And I realized that the answer is “not much.” I went back to the drawing board and completely restructured the course—and it’s spilled over into my in-person classes, too.

So, with that in mind, I wanted to end by telling you about a few specific assignments that have worked really well in my online classes—so much so that it’s changed the way I handle them in my in-person classes, too:

**Reading Responses**: In my in-person classes, I can tell based on the conversation if people are reading, and they are at least all *in the room* when I explain something. Giving reading quizzes online seemed too reductive, and if the students were anything like I had been in gen ed classes, they would simply read to answer my quiz questions instead of *actually reading*.

I decided to have students complete reading responses for every assigned essay, craft reading, lecture video, etc. These have four parts: (1) brief summary of the text, (2) list either three important takeaways from a craft text/lecture video OR three craft techniques the writer is utilizing in the text for example essays, (3) select a passage that stood out to you, that you have questions about, and/or that you want to talk more about in class, and (4) either ask a question OR make a connection between this reading and something else we’ve read/talked about this semester. I grade these as credit/no credit and don’t accept late submissions, but I drop the equivalent of 2-3 days’ worth of their lowest grades on them to give some flexibility.

After a couple of weeks, I realized the students were not just *reading*, but also better understand *how to read* and *what they should be watching for*; their insights about the essays we read, and about their classmates’ work, were *excellent*—and so I started requiring these same assignments in my in-person class, which has led to much stronger discussions and less pointless grading of pop quizzes for me.

**Small Group Workshop**: I had experiment with small group workshops before, usually of peer review drafts, and thought it might be easier to create a back-and-forth conversation between the writer and their readers, rather than just having students *only* write responses.

Since most of the students haven’t done workshop before, I give them very prescriptive instructions on how to respond to their classmates’ work. They then post their responses to a group discussion board and read and responded to each other’s comments with different, but still very prescriptive questions. The writer then reads each of the students’ responses, responds to some reflective questions I asked them, and asks follow-ups.

I ended up *loving* the back-and-forth this allows and the more conversational nature between writer and reader. As a result of this experience, as well as reading Beth Nguyen’s article [“Unsilencing the Writing Workshop” in Lit Hub](https://lithub.com/unsilencing-the-writing-workshop/), I’ve “unsilenced” my full class, in-person workshops, too, having the writer take a more active role. Students now write reflections to accompany their workshop drafts, which are available to all students; they can contextualize their essay for us, ask specific questions, and tell us about what effects they *want* the essay to have; they can ask follow up questions in real time, provide additional information, and refocus us if we’re going too far in the wrong direction. I also require students to write workshop reflections—2 pages, typically, about how workshop changed their perspective on their essay, what plans they have for revision, and what questions they still have.

**Participation**: The last big change I made is to how I handle “participation.” Like many people, I’m sure, I used to grade participation by telling students in the syllabus that they needed to be “active, engaged citizens of the writing workshop” and that they should “make frequent positive contributions to the class.” When I moved my class online, I originally dropped this portion of their grade—typically about 20% in my in-person classes. Later, though, I started to reflect a little more on this decision—and also on how I grade it normally.

This should be obvious, but I realized that I’m really grading *engagement*, which is not the same as students talking in class. And in talking to other teachers about inclusivity in the classroom, I’ve realized that grading participation in the older way, in terms of how often a student talks, asks questions, etc. also invites my own unconscious biases to come into play: is that student *actually* not paying attention, or am I reading their silence that way because of my own interpretation? It also sets up students from less privileged academic backgrounds to fail: how is someone supposed to know what it means to be an “active, engaged citizen” or what a “positive contribution” looks like if no one has ever told them?

The answer wasn’t just to drop it, since engagement is an important part of the classroom and I want to account for that in my assessment practices. Instead, I’ve started collecting “artifacts” that allow me to assess their engagement more objectively. I ask students respond to the material in writing, either as a warm-up assignment about the reading, an exit writing assignment about what we talked about that day, or a writing exercise to practice the craft techniques we’ve been studying. I’m then able to see something that allows them to show me how they are engaging with the material; this also allows me to notice confusion more quickly, since I’m seeing something from *every student* and not just the 50% who speak up in class. These artifacts, since they are completed in writing, are also very easy for me to incorporate into the online class; I don’t have as many of them, and this grade is worth less than in in-person classes, but it’s still been really helpful.