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Gina Marie Hurley

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7310-9259>

Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, U.S.

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Building a Community in Crisis: Working in a Teaching Center during COVID-19

Gina Marie Hurley

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7310-9259>

Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, U.S.

Abstract

This piece considers the hasty endings of medieval romance alongside the response to the chronic COVID-19 crisis, exploring the contours of the all-too-human desire for closure. During the pandemic, new communities of practice around teaching arose. These fresh collaborations appeared as we all needed to reimagine online classroom community for our students. I suggest that instructors deserve the same kind of support they offer students – and yet, their needs are too often relegated to the background of our conversations about pedagogy. By valuing and supporting instructors, we can help them reimagine the academy more broadly. The pandemic forced us to evaluate what we value in our academic communities. As we move forward, I propose that we take those lessons with us.

How do we find our way back to each other after, or indeed during, a crisis? The COVID-19 pandemic gave this question new urgency and resonance for me, but it was one with which I had already been preoccupied. In my research, I focus on romance, a genre that obsesses over reintegration and reunions. In the narratives I draw together, communities are torn asunder by human capriciousness, dishonesty, and violence. And yet, there is always a happy ending (at least for the heroes and heroines), one which usually takes the conventional form of reunification within the community. In a group of narratives that I have been studying, the sacrament of confession becomes the mechanism through which things are set right again – a possibility that arises because confession was, in the Middle Ages, a public act. Through the verification of confessional speech, the hero or heroine is restored, the evildoers punished, and the future secured, whether through lineage or sanctity. These endings offer a neat, hermetic closure to crises that, a few lines before the ending, seem intractable and unresolvable. As a result, and as many scholars have opined, they usually seem too happy – too easy – too convenient.

As the pandemic drags into a third year, I've been thinking about what makes those happy endings feel so unsettling. The bigger the crisis, the more it seems to require a hard-won closure. As Henrik Vigh (2008) suggests, this requirement stems from our tendency to view crisis from the perspective of its end, examining how people move on from a terrible situation.¹ But in a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, one which is becoming chronic rather than acute, there isn't a clearly perceptible ending. Instead, we are forced to inhabit a sustained moment of hazard and danger, forced to move forward even as we are mired in uncertainty. I wrote the first draft of this essay – and revised the final version of it – in the midst of rising caseloads from two distinct variants, a sentence I hoped I was done writing.

The word “crisis” is etymologically related to a turning point in a disease – it is the moment at which it becomes clear whether a patient will live or die (OED, s.v. “crisis, n.”).² I first recognized the COVID-19 pandemic as a real crisis in a moment when I, myself, was at a turning point. I had recently taken up a position as the Assistant Director of Graduate and Postdoctoral Teaching Development at Yale's Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning – but with my dissertation nearing completion, I would be starting administrative life in earnest. In my new position, I would lead a team of around 20 interdisciplinary graduate teaching fellows, each of whom run pedagogy workshops for other graduate students and postdoctoral scholars. The week before Spring Break in 2020, as case numbers began to rise, we made the decision to offer rudimentary Zoom training for our fellows. We were careful to say that this was just a precaution. Little did we know that we were hosting the first of many Zoom trainings that our center would offer over the next few months. As campus emptied out for break, I took up nearly full-time residence in Sterling Memorial Library, finalizing my dissertation alongside a friend. Between tidying up our footnotes we idly wondered how serious the virus would be.

On Friday, March 13th, I submitted a hard copy of my dissertation to the graduate school. Immediately thereafter, I strode quickly across an eerily empty campus to the Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, where my colleagues and I had an emergency meeting about what the shift to

¹ For introducing me to Vigh's work, I am indebted to Catherine Sanok (forthcoming) and to Elizabeth Allen, who first invited me to think seriously about the temporal and spatial nature of crisis.

² For more on this etymology, see Allen, Hurley, and Hurley (forthcoming).

online teaching would mean for our faculty and graduate instructors, and how we could best support them through it. In the next two weeks, as Spring Break became a prelude to a completely new kind of teaching for our faculty, our work at the center changed. Rather than working within our units, we were invited to collaborate with new colleagues and work across divisions that normally worked independently. In short, out of necessity, we created new kinds of collaboration and community. Those communities of practice also coalesced in the sessions we began to hold for instructors. Faculty members and graduate instructors sought us out for Zoom training, but they also found a chance to talk about teaching across disciplinary boundaries and hierarchies.

The idea that such communities of practice might serve us as teachers is nothing new, but it is traditionally disincentivized within academic life because it is not prioritized within hiring or tenure processes. In the romances I study, confession has the power to reunite communities precisely because the sacrament is put on display. Rather than being confined within the confessional box (which was not invented until 1565), it took place in prominent spaces of the church for all to see, though ideally, not to hear (Lochrie 1999, 29-31; Root 1997, 71-4; Mansfield 1995, 79). Similarly, when teaching is made into a public act, we raise its profile and acknowledge its value. I work in a center built into the middle of the library, complete with glass-walled classrooms – an architectural configuration that is meant to encourage structural change. These instructional spaces were designed –as the Poorvu Center’s Executive Director and Associate Provost for Academic Initiatives, Jennifer Frederick (2022), notes – to make teaching as public and visible as research is. It is a design that counters the prevailing norms of the academy. As Lee Shulman opined,

we experience isolation not in the stacks but in the classroom. We close the classroom door and experience pedagogical solitude, whereas in our life as scholars, we are members of active communities: communities of conversation, communities of evaluation, communities in which we gather with each other in our invisible colleges to exchange our findings, our methods, and our excuses. (1993, 1)

Ironically, quarantine, which forced us out of these transparent spaces, remediated pedagogical solitude in similar ways, putting people into cross-divisional conversations about teaching on Zoom. Instructors shared their frustrations and took inspiration from each other’s successes. In my position, I have been privileged to see such interdisciplinary conversations take place on a regular basis, even before the pandemic – in our pedagogy workshops for graduate students and postdoctoral scholars but also among our graduate fellows, an extraordinarily dedicated group of teachers and scholars who fearlessly advocate for our students and for each other. In rebuilding this community under duress and on a broader scale, a shared concern emerged: how might we sustain the sort of intellectual community in our online classrooms that we so valued in person? It is no surprise that this concern would emerge in a time of stress and sorrow. Even medieval theologians recognized that fellowship could remediate despair (and that isolation would only deepen it): as Alcuin of York put it in the *Liber de virtutibus et vitiis*, “tristitia hujus saeculi [sadness of the world]” can be alleviated by “fraternum colloquium [brotherly conversation]” (799/800, 62).³ The curative potential of community would become very clear indeed during the lonely days of the pandemic.

³ The same suggestion is made by Isidore of Seville, Ambrose of Milan, and John Chrysostom, as Susan Snyder notes (1965, 40).

Before the pandemic, while we spoke of community-building as a pedagogical practice, there was also a sense that these communities arose as a part of a mysterious alchemy of personality, carefully chosen readings, and well-staged conversations. Any experienced teacher can tell you that this is true in some measure: every classroom has what members of my freshmen seminar called “a vibe.” But by focusing on what is serendipitous and unique about these temporary classroom communities, it’s easy to discount the everyday ways that we as instructors build and enhance them. In our workshops to support the shift to online teaching, we asked instructors to generate a list of these strategies, and the beauty was often in their simplicity: learn your students’ names. Formulate meaningful small group discussion. Engage in casual conversation, before and after class. Share about yourself. The pandemic and its enforced digital mediation made all of these things harder to do instinctively or naturally. But with that drawback came at least one benefit: in order to attempt the completely normal in an abnormal time, we had to be transparent about what we were doing. The sudden imperative of transparency meant that we had to name our efforts to build a classroom community and clearly express our hope that such a community might sustain both instructors and students through an unquestionably grim time. That kind of transparency is a gift that follows us back into the in-person classroom.⁴ In allowing ourselves and our students to be, as my colleague, Suzanne Young phrased it, “human on Zoom,” we were able to explore what bringing our humanity into any classroom might yield. Even as the mode of delivery shifts, the principles of equitable teaching, which is really just good teaching, remain the same.

Indeed, there was another natural consequence of rebuilding our classrooms from the ground up: we were forced to reckon with the ways that they have always left out some of our students. Crisis can, as Rodrigo Cordero suggests, overturn the status quo. It reveals, especially to those of us who, like me, have enjoyed enormous privilege in the academy, the cracks that have always existed in the structures and systems that govern social life – and academic life is no exception, with racism, sexism, and ableism constituting many of its institutional features (2017, 1-2). Crisis, in other words, can disrupt what Charles Mills has called “an epistemology of white ignorance” – the “refusal to perceive systemic discrimination” (2017, 49, 71).⁵ I want to name explicitly the pattern in the following examples: the crisis of COVID-19 resulted in urgent, overdue attention paid to inequities that scholars and advocates of critical pedagogy (broadly defined) have been working to dismantle for decades.

To provide just one example, Zoom was such a distinct mode of pedagogical delivery that it required that more instructors adopt the principles of Universal Design for Learning that accessibility activists and many of our students have been advocating for years.⁶ Being forced to rethink the very basics of how we do what we do in the classroom made accessible design a more constant practice and concern for many instructors. For students with disabilities, the new readiness of universities to

⁴ One particularly promising project around transparency, *TILT*, began in 2009 (well before the pandemic), and continues to help instructors think about how they might advance “equitable teaching and learning practices that reduce systemic inequities in higher education.” See Winkelmes (2014).

⁵ For an examination of how white ignorance functions in the academy, see Cabrera, Franklin, and Watson (2017).

⁶ My thinking on ableism in the academy has been particularly informed by Anne-Marie Womack (2017). I have also found Jay Dolmage’s powerful argument about the link between institutions of higher education and the promotion of ableism to be indispensable: “academia powerfully mandates able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, as well as other forms of social and communicative hyperability, and this demand can best be defined as ableism” (2017, 7).

adopt previously “impossible” accommodations could feel frustrating: “change [...] came because suddenly, the needs of people who don’t identify as disabled converged with the needs of those who do” (Puang 2021). And even that limited change might be all too short-lived if we fail to bring it with us into our post-pandemic classrooms.

In a similarly long overdue turn, in the summer of 2020, many universities began to pay closer attention to the way that white supremacy orders higher education and its disciplines – to the work, again, that critical pedagogy scholars and advocates have been doing for decades.⁷ Antiracist pedagogy asks us to re-examine our basic frameworks and assumptions in our work with students, and here I want to amplify the way that graduate students at my institution have done just that in recent pedagogical projects – with the support of the Poorvu Center’s Teaching Innovation Program but through their own insight, expertise, and initiative. In the Political Science Department, for example, PhD Candidates Joy Wang and Da’Von Boyd, along with assistant professors Sarah Khan and Giulia Oskian, led a year-long working group about how the department might bring their teaching into alignment with a critical pedagogical practice – gathering visiting scholars into conversation with current faculty and graduate students. Similar projects sprung up in the French department, with Walid Bouchakour and Doyle Calhoun proposing a counter-canon of global Francophone texts for the introductory curriculum, and in the History of Art, with Chelsea Connelly, Kevin Hong, and Gavriella Levy Haskell initiating a new resource for critically reflective teaching. Too often the efforts of graduate students (and other early career scholars) to reshape the academy go unrecognized or – even worse – are actively penalized, particularly when that work is performed by people of color. By supporting and rewarding graduate students and early career scholars for this labor (materially and professionally), institutions can use their money and cultural capital to begin the long work of fulfilling their promises of equity and social justice.

The teaching and research of medieval texts is a necessary site for such interventions, since structures of exclusion and inequity are at work in archival spaces as well. In the summer of 2020, I worked with instructors at the London Rare Books School and the London International Paleography Summer School to think about how to help students understand material culture without access to the materials themselves. Access is, of course, a privilege – one that wealthy, primarily white institutions have always enjoyed. The emptying out of visitors and scholars from special collections gave a new urgency to the problems of exclusion and gatekeeping that have always operated in these spaces. As scholars of critical archival studies note, that exclusion has everything to do with racism and colonialist exploitation, which shape who uses archives, what objects are preserved and valued and by whom, and how those objects are described and presented (Caswell, Punzalan, and Sangwand 2017). By opening up those privileges and exclusions as topics for classroom conversation, we might help students both navigate and interrogate the rituals of access that govern these spaces. Teaching about objects without access to them is business as usual for many medievalists, who cannot physically access medieval manuscripts and other artifacts due, for example, to lack of funding, physical or

⁷ Here, I invoke the language of Roderick Ferguson in his influential book, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (2012). In addition, I have found the following sources on antiracist pedagogy and institutional languages of inclusion and equity to be particularly useful in my own work: Ahmed (2012); McNair, Bensimon, and Malcom-Piqueux (2020); Crenshaw (2019); Jennings (2020).

political barriers to travel, or caregiver obligations. There are many medievalists and special collections experts who are working to interrogate and expand access to archival materials – and their efforts reshape access to our field.⁸

What does it mean to return to our classrooms and instructional spaces? This topic was at the heart of the Poorvu Center’s Spring Teaching Forum in 2021 – an annual event that gathers faculty, graduate students, and postdoctoral fellows across the boundaries of rank and discipline (and against the research-driven norms of the Ivy League) to discuss teaching. At that moment, in April of 2021, we were in the excitement and rush of receiving newly available vaccines. But even in that haze of optimism, we didn’t dare speak of a certain return to the classroom, carefully wording our advertisements and event descriptions as purely speculative – devoutly to be wished but not to be expected. The sense of contingency, which limited our ability to look ahead to a firm and foreseeable future, was hardly new to me as someone who supports graduate students and postdoctoral fellows (and as a recent PhD myself). It resembled a temporary, COVID-induced version of the more protracted situation in which many academics, working without the protections of tenure or a contract, find themselves.

At that year’s forum, we resisted the idea that the return to the classroom could or should be a reversion to a pre-pandemic “normal.” Instead, that return was freighted by anxiety and uncertainty for many instructors, myself included. In fall 2021, I was teaching a creative nonfiction class that was deeply familiar to me, *Reading and Writing the Modern Essay*. In previous semesters, the intensity of workshoping and revision produced – as if by magic, though in fact by shared goals and careful design – a community of writers among the students. That year, my students were more reticent than in previous years. In my pedagogical workshops, I share a number of strategies to kickstart conversation, and I found myself using all of them. I needed, in other words, to plan for the kinds of anxiety that lingered after the pandemic, both for myself and for my students. Slowly but surely my students responded to these invitations to conversation. They wrote about how, after two years in isolation, they were being asked to articulate a new identity for themselves in their first year of college – just as they were getting used to being embodied in communal space again.

Their observations held true for me, too: the classroom didn’t feel like the same place I had left, in great part because I was not the same person who had left it. I fell into restless patterns of overplanning, overthinking, and overdoing – all in the service of an anxiety I hadn’t felt in my teaching before. No one needs four distinct backup activities for a single class meeting, but you could bet that, on any day of the last semester, I had them! This was enormously frustrating for me, and not a little ironic: part of my job is to help instructors at the very beginning of their careers structure their approach to their teaching, balancing their work in the classroom with the other demands of their professional and personal lives. I knew precisely how unhelpful my overpreparation was for my

⁸ There are many instances of this kind of work: the *Peripheral Manuscripts Project*,⁸ led by Elizabeth Hebbard, Ian Cornelius, Michelle Dalmau, and Sarah Noonan; Shirin Fozi Jones’ exhibition, *A Nostalgic Filter: A University of Pittsburgh Exhibition*,⁹ which focuses on facsimiles; [Digital Scriptorium](#), a consortium of American libraries with pre-modern materials, led by Lynn Ransom; the [Traveling Scriptorium](#) at Yale University Library, created by Christine McCarthy, Marie-France Lemay, Paula Zyats, Karen Jutzi, Ansley Joe, Laura O’Brien-Miller, and Kathryn James; [Digital Mappa](#), created by Martin Foys and now hosted by the Schoenberg Institute of Manuscript Studies; Sarah Charles’ project, [Teaching Manuscripts](#); and the [Hidden Stories: Books Along the Silk Roads](#) exhibit and resource, created by University of Toronto’s Old Books, New Science Lab, in collaboration with the Aga Khan Museum.

students and how damaging it was for me, and yet, it took me the better part of a semester to let it go. Like COVID-19 itself, the impacts of the pandemic lingered for me and my students, even as we strove for closure.

My experience is suggestive of a larger trend: too often we fail to consider the very people responsible for creating our student-centered classroom – namely, the instructors themselves. Because COVID-19 threw all of us into an extended state of vulnerability, it was far more obvious that instructors are human too. And yet, for two years we watched instructors perform the superhuman task of moving courses online, supporting students across time zones and vast geographic expanses. No one will be surprised to hear that, on our campus as on others, instructors have begun to experience the symptoms of burnout and stress. It was to this topic that we turned for our Spring Teaching Forum in April 2022.

In the space of the forum instructors were able to talk about what the past two years have meant for them – about how they have coped and sometimes ceased to cope – how they have felt alternately supported and let down. Rather than thinking of burnout as a personal issue, they considered the structural dynamics that create it: higher education’s imperatives of overwork, of leaving our humanity at the door, of abandoning work-life balance in pursuit of an often unattainable life of the mind. But more importantly, they were invited to imagine the academy as it might be rather than as it is. Much of that vision, as it emerged in our conversation, has to do with the way that we can overturn the hierarchies and silos of the university to find community and solidarity with one another. As we considered what that community might look like, we turned again and again to the value of sharing stories and experiences in ways that break down artificial, institutional boundaries.

COVID-19 has shown us what really matters about our classrooms: the communities we hope to build but also the students we exclude – the possibilities of our instructional expertise but also the limits of our personal capacity and the institutional structures within which we operate. In the manner of any crisis, COVID-19 compelled us “to ask questions [...] [moving] us away from all firmness and mastery” (Cordero 2017, 1). By asking these questions, we can begin to imagine a different future for ourselves and for our students. The happy endings of medieval romance are all about convention and restoration, a return to business as usual. But, as Nicola McDonald points out, the questions raised in the middle of these texts aren’t so easily put away (2004, 16). In *Sir Gowther*, for example, even the son of a demon can be redeemed and made part of the wider chivalric community. Gowther dies a lord and emperor, but he also dies childless, with the text eager to inter his history of violence and vice in the grave along with him.⁹ The text’s real work, including its exploration of the fragile nature of human forgiveness, takes place in the middle. In our own circumstance, the vast readjustment of academic life around COVID-19 has invited us to think about the structural inequities of the academy, rendering its inclusions and its myriad exclusions unmistakable. The pandemic has also, at least so far, refused any real ending, even as there is an increasing pressure to declare it “over” – to retreat into epistemologies of ignorance and silence, the epistemologies that give cover to and sustain structural inequities, including racism and ableism, in our institutions. It is in the uncomfortable middle that we have already begun, I think, to find our way back to one another. As we continue to negotiate what a

⁹ For two distinct readings of this ending, see Oswald (2010, 194) and Ambrisco (2015, 222-225).

return might look like, I hope we will bring these questions with us, casting a critical eye on the conventions of academic life, and choosing carefully what we reject, what we restore, what we recreate.

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