

Where We Are: Writing Initiatives Designed to Support Well-Being

Facilitating Well-Being in a Pandemic through Writing Course Innovation

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It is still easy to recall the deep sense of unmooredness that we experienced in March 2020. Like many writing program administrators (dawn and Heidi) and faculty mentors (Ti), we scrambled to calm instructors, facilitate the move to remote teaching, and offer emotional and collaborative support even as we attempted to meet the other directives coming our way. Then, as the shape of the summer and fall emerged, another sobering realization hit us: we had a cohort of incoming graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) arriving in the fall during the uncertainty of a pandemic.

At the same time, our institution was preparing faculty for the experience of teaching in a pandemic, including support for the design and development of fully online, high enrollment, high impact (HEHI) sections that focused on student success and engagement, and served as templates for future semesters. In the HEHI ENGL 101 project, we sought to create a first year writing (FYW) experience that would best serve the learning and well-being of FYW students, incoming GTAs, and the faculty mentor. While designing, teaching, and administering this course, our collective learning nudged us toward new practices, such as deliberately working through an ethic of kindness and collaboration, being purposefully vulnerable within our teaching and learning contexts, and experimenting with new forms of support and mentorship.

Designing for High Enrollment and Impact

Our idea for this large, experimental class was inspired by scholarship on large-scale writing classes (Jaxon et al.; Seigel et al.), writing and learning transfer (Adler-Kassner and Wardle; Brent; Yancey, et al.), and contract grading practices (Kelly-Riley and Whithaus). Early conversations with Shelley Rodrigo were incredibly useful as she helped us think through the logistics of a large-scale FYW course.

The HEHI ENGL 101 project resulted in an online, asynchronous course that enrolled three-hundred students, nearly twenty percent of all incoming ENGL 101 students that fall semester. In summer 2020, Ti and dawn designed the course, closely supported by a dedicated eCampus Center team. In a time of such uncertainty, the impact of the eCampus support and funding on fac-

ulty well-being cannot be overstated; their assistance with creating an online writing course in a new learning management system freed us up to focus on the FYW and GTA student experiences.

Early on, we realized that our shared values coalesced around the well-being of FYW students, new GTAs, and ideally, ourselves. Although we were developing a large online course, we wanted students to have the small, collaborative, workshop course experience and for Ti and the GTAs to know the students. Course features directly addressed the well-being of all course users. For example, we designed the course to attend to student and GTA work expectations with a mid-semester break to pause, reflect, and catch up on work and we redistributed the GTA grading and response load. We also worked with the eCampus Center and Educational Access Center to minimize barriers to student learning. In addition to supporting equitable instruction, this approach reduced student emails while having the added benefit of modeling effective course design for GTAs.

Teaching for High Enrollment and High Impact

All HEHI ENGL 101 activities and structures were rooted in a belief that the course was more likely to be successful if students' welfare was accounted for in the design. To attend to the well-being of the FYW students, we structured the course around stable groups of eight to ten. Mark (a GTA in HEHI ENGL 101) noted that his assigned students were often willing to share their struggles with him, enabling him to advise them in the same way that he has in subsequent traditional classes. Likewise, since students worked closely with one another, they tended to look out for one another, including reaching out to Ti or their GTA to check on peers who missed a group assignment. There was a sense of safety and the opportunity for more mentorship. Most of them were arriving after a senior year that had been disrupted by the start of the pandemic, and they needed extra guidance and encouragement, as well as a sense of connection to campus.

We wanted to ensure that GTAs had more support, collectively, than in the typical approach to training. HEHI ENGL 101 allowed for a true apprenticeship in which new GTAs worked with both one another and an experienced faculty member (Ti) who served as the instructor of record for both it and the required graduate pedagogy course. Weekly team meetings allowed GTAs to share their observations, and they collaborated to solve challenges that arose. In the apprenticeship model, the pressures of teaching were productively distributed. The GTAs studied and practiced pedagogy concurrently, facilitating deeper learning and longer retention of pedagogical theory and practices. In addition to studying assigned texts, GTAs also informally studied the pedagogy of the lead instructor. As a result, apprentice GTAs seemed to have stronger

capacities to support students. Though their early foray into teaching was not without difficulty, the support they received helped to free up their cognitive and emotional resources, which they were then able to allocate to tasks such as reaching out to and encouraging struggling students, providing personalized and constructive feedback on students' writings, and empathizing with and advising students on managing stressors that arose.

Implications

FYW students engaged substantively with this online class, as indicated in their end-of-semester reflections and retention data. Ultimately, while there is much to unpack and interrogate about this model, the course holds promise for the field of writing studies as we continue to explore humane approaches to the ongoing crisis teaching and learning environment. In addition, HEHI ENGL 101 unsettles our assumptions on how to tend to our courses, our students, and ourselves. We see several implications for the field to consider.

This radical reimagining of FYW class scope, scale, and size required us to think about the experience of the course rather than relying on our own closely held understandings about teaching and learning writing. As program directors, for example, Heidi and Dawn were concerned about student engagement and retention when our field's work directly links class size with student success. However, multiple students indicated that they were unaware of the enormity of the class enrollment since they experienced the course largely through small groups, interactions with their assigned GTA, and with Ti; the course thus preserved the small workshop feel. The course also had higher than average retention for online courses at our institution with a low drop-fail-withdraw (DFW) rate of four percent. What other commonplaces about the student experience in writing courses might we reevaluate after working in this extended-crisis teaching and learning environment?

The typical Boise State graduate assistantship consists of twenty work hours per week, and this expectation helped the team teachers to manage workload by treating this experience as more of a part-time job than a calling, especially given that many of the GTAs did not plan on teaching beyond their assistantship. That said, GTAs still struggled to meet the requirements and expectations of this job. The GTAs were able to keep their hours below twenty per week, but many indicated that teaching was exhausting; affectively, they felt themselves to be working more than twenty hours. This might be due to the overwhelming nature of beginning graduate school during a pandemic, and there is more to explore here. However, as Mark observed, the key takeaway is that support is directly linked to well-being. We can't always differentiate the experience of stressors; so if we want people to be well, we must attend to the whole person. As we move forward, we want to continue to rethink the

purpose, goals, and context of assistantships in FYW courses. How might we create experiences that are deeply and deliberately scaffolded?

Planning for the GTA experience came from intended goodwill and a goal of supporting the well-being of all students involved in this course. In fact, an ethic of kindness surfaced in the pandemic that transformed how we collectively think about teaching in general. Instructors do so much internalized and unconscious work, making it easy to lose sight of the struggles of teaching, teaching a first-semester, first year course in particular, and of being a new graduate student. Additionally, this model required a level of collaboration and vulnerability that none of us had experienced as teachers or as students. When any one of us fell behind with grading, for example, we all saw it. But this also created an opportunity for us to support and mentor one another frequently, which is something rare in GTA training and mentoring experiences.

This team has always endeavored to develop learning experiences with our students' well-being in mind. We consider ourselves kind human beings who approach our courses with care. Still, designing, teaching, and administering the HEHI course in this extended-crisis teaching and learning environment led us to reexamine commonplaces surrounding FYW and GTA experiences, thus refocusing our professional goals through a lens of goodwill, kindness, and collaboration.

Works Cited

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