Slow Teaching: Lessons from a Pandemic Semester

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Much writing on pedagogy has the shape of conversion narrative–quite rightly, since it's hard to teach well if you haven't first taught badly, sometimes spectacularly so. I could write a story like that, full of plenty of bumbling, as I scrambled to learn about technologies I knew absolutely nothing about. In this story, Moodle, the Blackboard-like platform used by my college, turns out to be able to do miraculous things unsuspected by this technologically illiterate medievalist. But an equally valuable experience for any teacher (and a little less daunting) is simple clarification, the way the unexpected can help you figure out what you actually care about most as a teacher. While I don't want to make my pandemic experience sound more gratifying than it was, I think I did learn some important things about what's really essential to my classroom. And while technology wasn't irrelevant to that experience, it's not the main thing I want to talk about here. Instead, the revelation for me was about slowing down and doing less, better. This is especially true of those courses—e.g., survey courses—in which the goal of "coverage" is perhaps too often conflated with a scholarly ideal of rigor. But I found it to be true, also, in courses that I already think of as "intensive" rather than extensive–that is to say, courses devoted to the study of a particular author (Chaucer, in the case I discuss below) or to the acquisition of a skill (such as essay writing). Figuring out what was essential to my classroom made it feel, I think, less cluttered and more like a space for exploration. In a way, you could even say that being absent from my classroom helped me figure out more

clearly what I believe a classroom is for.

This isn't to say that I lost any of my appreciation of the classroom as an irreplaceably vital physical space. I teach at a small, residential liberal-arts college, perhaps the very definition of an emplaced institution, where faculty-student contact is at the center of the college's entire reason for being. My colleagues and I have all experienced in these past months and years how fragile a thing community really is, how hard a thing to hold together in the absence of some kind of embodied togetherness. Everyone who goes to academic conferences knows why they are still important. Likewise, in a classroom, physical presence matters. We can probably all call to mind at least one specific moment when a class, previously a random assemblage of persons, started to feel like a community. Maybe it's when you catch the skeptical look on one student's face during a debate and goad the latter into speaking her mind, or when a student, previously quiet, says something near the end of a class that's so right that everyone spontaneously applauds. Both, it happens, took place in a course I was teaching on Chaucer just before we had to move to remote learning. In that course, a few weeks after we'd been separated (the students having been given scant days to pack and move home), we happened to be reading a poem, called *Troilus and Criseyde*, that ended up feeling relevant to all of us in a way I never could have predicted. It's a story about two lovers who are separated when a calamity, the Trojan war, befalls the city and one of the lovers, Criseyde, is induced to escape, leaving the other behind to face certain death. But the real pathos of the story is in the death of the relationship itself, as Criseyde slowly learns to move on with her life and accept that Troy is doomed while Troilus clings with a noble rage to all that he has lost. Among other things, it's a story about how physical distance works with a kind of remorseless logic to produce emotional estrangement. It got me thinking about how the classroom, too, is a kind of protected but ultimately fragile space. At first I simply mourned its loss, as

did my students, for understandable reasons. But increasingly, partly because of my experience in that course, I've come to think of the classroom less as the default place where everything happens than as a special kind of space for focused interrogation. I have tended, I now think in retrospect, to rely upon it for too many things, and perhaps to stuff it over-full, rather as Troilus makes an unsustainable hothouse of his love in a city that proves all too transitory. I would even say that, in retrospect, I have tended almost to fetishize the classroom as a space for intellectual community, to the neglect of the myriad other forms this community might take. At the same time, I haven't fully seen the potential of the classroom for doing slow, careful work with my students.

There is perhaps something specifically American about the fixation on "coverage" and the related idea that the classroom is the place where that coverage is ensured. In many other parts of the word, education is more self-guided and required contact hours are lower, but the contact that does occur can sometimes feel more meaningful and is typically more individualized. Returning to the classroom after many months of enforced separation, I found that I was more likely to ask myself questions such as: "Do we really need to meet as a full class to do this?" "What are we really meeting for?" "What do I want out of it?" The answers have occasionally surprised me. I have decided that it's ok to cancel a class (or even two) and meet individually with students instead. While I have long done this in my writing courses–a context in which 1-on-1 instructor/student meetings are vital–I decided in a recent course on literary history to schedule a "late midterm" that was in effect an oral exam, so that I could gauge students' progress and intervene midstream in the case of problems. In other cases, we've held meetings over Zoom simply because it made sense for us to do so. For example, student presentations often work better; less time is lost to tech setup, and some text is easier to see on a laptop. Student confidence often seems greater. Having conducted

a translation seminar over Zoom, in which we were easily able to follow detailed line-by-line interpretive choices, I may never again do that workshop in a physical classroom. And I am still amazed that, even late in the pandemic, it took me a moment to realize that a timely class discussion of how Zoom is changing the way people communicate (in an introductory course on linguistics) could profitably be conducted in the medium we were discussing.

Beyond Zoom, which at least superficially resembles a classroom in being a synchronous mode of learning, much of what I have learned to appreciate about so-called "asynchronous" delivery modes has to do with the much greater opportunity that everyone, myself included, has for deliberate and thoughtful response to the ideas of others. When students prepare and post presentations in advance, everyone can come in having watched them and precious class time can be devoted to a discussion of the ideas raised. (Students also gain valuable experience figuring out, for instance, how to make effective use of slides, how to deliver a talk remotely, etc.—things they need to know). Likewise, many students have told me they appreciate having time to think through their response to a course reading and post it to an online forum instead of being put on the spot, day after day, in a physical classroom. Pre-class annotation work can be done on denser texts using an app (like Hive) or more simply with Google docs. Reading quizzes can be given in advance and used more deliberately to structure class discussion (I find, in fact, that posting them well in advance of a class session has had the effect of making me better at constructing them to be pedagogically useful and not mere tools of assessment). And of course, like many colleagues, I have gotten used to recording lectures and have grown to appreciate how these allow me to set up questions for discussion before class, in a more dynamic way than, say, text-based study questions always allow. The "mini-lectures" of up to 15 minutes that I upload in advance of a class

session serve many purposes. I sometimes tie these to a quiz or activity (e.g., how to do a good word etymology). In other cases, I want to address some point of historical context or raise an issue that requires sensitive handling or might be experienced as jarring if it came out of the blue in a classroom (for example, addressing the long-debated possibility, now regarded as improbable, that Chaucer committed sexual assault and how this might frame some of his writing, with a survey of relevant documentary evidence and thoughts on why the debate still matters). Increasingly I find that there is usually something I want my students to be thinking about in the days and hours before class starts, and that this can often more efficiently be delivered as a short lecture. And it's no surprise, perhaps, that students are likelier to feel comfortable responding when they've had time to think through the questions I'm raising. It also conveys effectively to my students that I care about their success, a thing which–despite our best efforts–may not always be apparent to students when contact is limited to 50-minute intervals and isn't reinforced in any other significant way. I consider a short mini-lecture now to be something like the emails I used to send before class: a way of reminding students that I am there, and of setting up the discussion to come.

All of these strategies are fundamentally a matter of what I'd call "gardening": ways of getting rid of the extraneous weeds that have taken root in my classroom over the years, in some cases, I now realize, getting in the way of real learning: the things that are better done online or even not done at all, like the "reading of the syllabus" as though it were some kind of sacred rite. And although the specifics of my efforts at gardening may differ from your own, you probably have done much the same thing and faced many of the same questions about, for instance, how to balance the efficiencies to be gained from doing more work outside the classroom, and the variety to be had from mixing things up, with the need to avoid overwhelming students or creating unmanageably

complicated "to do lists." I think that well done, this kind of rooting-out of the inessential can create space for genuine reflection and togetherness. What forms of teaching and learning might take root in such a space instead? What do teachers have time for when they aren't busy handing out and collecting reading quizzes, or taking too long on an introductory powerpoint that not everyone can see, or trying to cram half a dozen student presentations into a single class session–when, in short, class time can be devoted to the actual experience of being together?

I have found that much of what happens is lovely. Just as asynchronous modes of learning allow everyone involved more time to reflect, so, too, a classroom freed of some of its clutter feels like a slower and more generous space. There is more time for quiet reflection or writing, for spontaneous conversation, or even (in one case, when I felt like we were all just exhausted from the ups and downs of the pandemic) for doing 10 minutes of pleasure-reading together, followed by an informal discussion of who was reading what, and why. The opening lecture I give, or the closing remarks, leave time and space for something that feels, in a good way, like ritual–the gestures and niceties through which a community knows itself to be one. When we do talk, there is time to go all the way around the room and for all voices to be heard, if that's what feels right in the moment, and less of a need for me to police a conversation merely in the interests of getting through a lesson plan. All of which has made me see anew that the classroom is indeed a special place, as I've always thought–just not entirely in the way I thought. Having never had the experience of having a lab component in any of my courses, I now understand, I think, my classroom to be among other things a kind of experimental space. I want now to give a few more sustained examples of what I mean. They all involve my being forced by circumstances to rethink my assumptions about what a classroom is really for.

My first example is from that Chaucer course I

mentioned earlier. How could I recreate, without a physical classroom, the feelings of immediacy and embodiment upon which a real appreciation of literature depends? I decided in the end to have students do something I would never ask them to do in an actual classroom, and certainly not over Zoom: recite poetry, with as much flair as they could muster, at some length (at least a couple of minutes). And, in spite of my somewhat low expectations, it worked! Instead of the awkward and inquisitorial-feeling recitations usually produced in a classroom, students actually seemed to enjoy posting videos of themselves reciting and commenting on a favorite passage from the day's reading, in their best Middle English, on the course site—as they do enjoy making things and sharing them—and I soon found that their personalities came through. My favorites were by a student who seems to have determined that he was a DJ on an R&B station, and who invariably began his videos with a suave "Greetings, cyber-Chaucerians." Another student became the class etymologist, noting and tracing the meanings of individual words in Chaucer's English across the long poem *Troilus and Criseyde*. Another was the most expressive reader, while a third was focused productively on issues of gender. The DJ soon found himself attuned to moments of humor in the texts and who exactly might be laughing (the characters, the medieval audience, or us). This left us free, in our virtual classroom, to discuss what interpretive choices the readers had made, which led in turn to fine close reading of a kind I have not always witnessed in a physical classroom. Our conversations over Zoom were so enriched by this pre-class assignment that our time together almost felt more, rather than less, embodied as a result. I think in future versions of the course I will continue having students make these little artifacts before class, rather than putting students on the spot and asking them to recite Chaucer's words in what almost always ends up being a far more tentative performance, not infrequently terminated by the victim's plea to be allowed to stop. A typical

requirement for any Chaucer course that students too often dread (pronunciation mastery) can become, with a little distance and space for reflection, a pleasurable way of finding one's way into texts of the long-ago past. Of course, we still read Chaucer's words together as well, but I no longer feel like the kind of "presence" that one associates with the physical classroom is actually confined to it. Indeed, one might profitably use the space of a classroom to examine what that presence reveals.

The same course offered me another opportunity for rethinking a "traditional" pedagogical aim by getting me to reflect on what I am really trying to teach through the activity. In this case, it was a simple matter of reverse-engineering an assignment (something that we are now all busily doing anew in the wake of Chat-GPT's ability to write plausible-sounding prose). The challenge took the form of my realization that students could very easily pass an in-class translation quiz with a click of the mouse, or a near-to-hand cell phone. So I did what I really should have thought of ages ago: have them do it the other way around, translating a snippet of present-day English into words that Chaucer himself might have written. It ended up being rather enjoyable to think with my class about how Chaucer would have written a self-help mantra like "Have the courage to be kind." More profoundly, it became a way for us to think about what different kinds of English make possible. This became clearest for students, I think, when we tried to translate the College's "statement on inclusivity" into something that Chaucer might have been able to understand and appreciate. I was delighted to see how one student, for instance, turned a rather arid mission statement about creating "a diverse and inclusive community" into a humane vision of people trying to make "a confortynge felaweship of sondry folk" (a comforting fellowship of various folk). Another student wrote of her desire for us to create a place "there all wightes…aren treated with gentilesse" (where all people are treated with

gentleness). Funnily enough, a few weeks later I attended a virtual event at my college where a student asserted that, in his experience, "inclusivity" and a feeling of belonging are two separate things. Comfort, gentleness: these are values that are emotionally grounded rather than programmatic, and I am glad my students were able to see that what motivates a commitment may be very different from the institutional language in which the commitment gets couched. At the end of the course, I told them that one reason for really getting to know how someone talks (Chaucer in this case, but it doesn't really matter) is that it can shock you out of conventional ways of talking, thinking, feeling. I used the example of what a young trans poet called Jos Charles is doing when she uses Chaucerian English to prod her readers into looking at the world anew ("shok," she writes, "is a struktured respons"). You can't get away from the fact that language was always someone else's first—from "structure," in Charles' formulation—but you can learn how to use it for your own ends, to speak what you need to (what Charles calls finding a "new waye / 2 speech this," in a gesture that brings together Chaucer's English with contemporary online discourse). The point, I told my students, is that if you learn to feel the world through someone else's language, it can become authentic for you—a way of narrating your own story. I never quite would have put it that way before, perhaps because, without really thinking about it, I'd never really considered before how students might benefit from seeing that translation can be a two-way street: not just an effort to understand the past, but a way of seeing what our own forms of speech have now rendered less visible.

My final example is for me the clearest in which I learned to take something slowly that I might previously have skipped lightly over in the interests of "getting through the list." It took place in an intermediate-writing course I have taught many times, without ever previously having made successful use of a technique that is fairly essential to such courses:

group work. I have in the past, to tell the truth, been slightly nauseous about group work, perhaps because I still remember from my own college days the professor who would blandly announce that it was time to "circle the wagons" at the start of each class, then sit at his desk unmolested by the threat of having to engage with students. By contrast, the best teachers always seemed, to my undergraduate consciousness, like magicians in whose presence conversation took on a life of its own, drawing their students into passionate debates through a kind of attentive and charismatic presence. But even the most gifted teacher can't sustain that magic over Zoom for an hour at a time or more. Conversation flags; awkward silences proliferate. So I rediscovered the power of group work, and I found to my surprise that students loved it. One student told me that the connections he developed with his groupmates were the only form of meaningful peer contact that he had for the entire semester. Others expressed how lucky they felt to be paired with people whose knowledge and experience were different from their own, and to be able to draw on that diversity of perspective throughout the term.

What changed? Partly, no doubt, students were just happy to have a way of connecting to their peers across the distance. Yet in the past I had always found peer review to be a waste of time. I told myself that students were reluctant to be critical of one another, or were unwilling to take one another seriously as sources of insight, or were in some cases obviously just phoning it in. No doubt some of that was true. Peer review is tricky and can often be unproductive. But this time, I started to realize that the advice they were giving one another was…not bad! Looking back, I can see now that past students may well simply have been picking up on my own distaste for a procedure that has become mainstream in college writing courses but which I had always regarded as more or less a kind of window-dressing. I never would have suspected that I was failing at group work because I was doing too little of it, not adequately, in this case, surrendering

control of the space of the classroom (and my fantasies about what it should contain) so that real learning could happen. This is what I learned when I decided, in this course that was going nowhere, to relieve our collective Zoom-class fatigue by declaring one day a week a "small-group" day. It's an idea I stole from a colleague, Chris Phillips, who remarked that when it's impossible to build a coherent community out of an entire class, you can at least encourage students to build their own micro-communities. He was right. If it was hard to cultivate a feeling of community in a virtual room of people who were all taking a required course, it was far easier to do so in a small group. The trust and connection formed in those groups, moreover, had a healthy impact on the dynamic of our "plenary sessions," which were more energized when they didn't occur more often than felt manageable for all of us. Because it's so hard to build trust across distances, some of the group sessions I designed were intended mainly to cultivate it. One exercise early in the course, for example, asked students to narrate their earliest memory (since the course theme was about the construction of selfhood). In other sessions, students confessed to their "writing sins" (tics, such as verbal crutches, that we all have as writers and can't seem to shake) and tried to figure out where these largely unconscious habits come from and what we're really trying to communicate when we fall back on them. Later in the course, when we did get to the traditional peer-review activities, I found they worked much better broken down into small steps across a period of several weeks. We began with a session in which students, having read a short piece about how to visualize the "shape" of a personal essay, were then instructed to draw the prospective shape of the essay they were contemplating and hold it up to the screen so their group mates could see it (in part, this, too, was a trust-building exercise). By the end of the process, students were thinking about more global issues, such as how to question or refine the conceptual framework or theoretical lens through which their essay was written. I also made the

decision to have students reflect on their group meetings in a running journal, noting ways in which their sense of their own writing was evolving through contact with other perspectives. My participation, aside from the occasional pop-in, was limited to my reading of their reflective "minutes," although as the semester progressed I found myself being approached by multiple students who wanted to talk to me about an idea they'd had in their group discussions. That's how I really knew the groups were doing something worthwhile.

Perhaps unsurprisingly to those who have long been preaching the power of small-group work, this all yielded far better results than the ordeal I had been unthinkingly perpetrating on my students for years, in which group work always ended up feeling like a strange kabuki-theater version of student-centered-learning, hastily undertaken and as soon forgotten. Only once I made the decision to make small-group work a central and regular feature of the course, I found that it harbored uses I hadn't dreamed of. Perhaps most importantly, it encouraged students to see the writing process as inherently social, one of the ways in which we have conversations with each other. It seems simple enough, yet students often struggle to grasp this, perhaps because our culture identifies writing with privacy and self-imposed isolation, as though it were a kind of dreadfully boring meditation. Having students actually demonstrate for one another that writing is, in fact, an act of community turns out to be way more effective than just telling them that it is. It seems so obvious in retrospect, but before this it had always felt to me like there was too much else to do: too many examples of good writing to read, too many things I needed to explain to my students, too many chapters of our writing manual to get through. I tell my students that good writing takes time, but in my own pedagogy I have often acted like a man in a hurry, too busy to recognize that good teaching takes time, too. Only when it suddenly became possible to

accept that not everything on my list would get done did I realize that not all of it needed to–that other, better things could happen instead.

As in many of the examples I've discussed here, I think what really changed here is that my "checklist" mentality of what needed to get done in a particular class session–or indeed in a semester–became just a bit more flexible once I was faced with the need to make some hard choices about what was really essential (and doable) in the circumstances. Recitation, which I'd always thought of as old-fashioned and even rather marginal to what I wanted students to learn, became a way of structuring our encounter with the literary past. Translation became an exercise in cultural understanding rather than merely a tool of assessment. Group work went from feeling like the thing I never had time for in a course to being its lifeblood. Meanwhile, some things I had always thought I needed to get through in the classroom ended up feeling a bit less consequential. I realized that students don't need to read a half-dozen of Montaigne's essays in a writing class: one or two is fine. They don't need to read everything Chaucer wrote, some of which is not that good. We don't even need to discuss everything I ask them to read, as though there were no such thing as "food for thought" that they might chew on without my help. I realized that I have much more freedom than I ever let myself claim, especially with respect to the tasks that I've too often in the past found myself doing sloppily, in the last minutes of a class. I found myself thinking, time and again: "If you're going to do this, why not go all in? And if you don't like it, stop doing it!" The whole point of a garden, after all, is that you get to decide what a weed is and what isn't.

Although it took my full embrace of a technologically enabled "remoteness" for me to realize some of what I've been trying to communicate here, I won't claim that much of it is new, even though it feels new to me. In our hallway here in the English department at Lafayette College we proudly

display a portrait of Francis A. March, the first person in the United States to hold the title of Professor of English. He is comfortably seated in a room that bears more resemblance to an office or study than to a traditional classroom, though a blackboard looms above his head. The space is cluttered with books and papers stacked everywhere in piles that seem about to topple over, but the professor is unperturbed and simply gazes out at the viewer in a kindly and inviting sort of way, like a man who has all the time in the world. When I first saw this portrait, it seemed to me like a relic of a lost age, a time when the pursuit of knowledge depended upon, and demanded, a leisure we no longer enjoy, either as teachers or as students. The picture conveyed almost painfully to me how far we are from the intimacy of that kind of educational experience, one in which professors, as Oxford dons still do today, literally inhabited the rooms they taught in, and when a teacher of literature could spend a whole class session untangling a single passage from Shakespeare, word by word (as March, a linguist by training, famously was known to do). But now it seems to me that March's little room is a good way of visualizing what any classroom can be when it's a space that makes time for reflection and spontaneity. Surely it would look a lot like March's, filled with the essential business of the teacher of literature–words literally falling on top of one another, the open volumes that contain them spilling out in a lovely mess onto every available surface. I now suspect that any room can be that room, whether it's virtual or physical. So I've made a small resolution. Instead of forever keeping an eye glued to my notes to see what I have to get through next, I'm going to try a little more often to have us just sit there together, my students and me, in the serene confidence that whatever happens in that disorderly but wonderful space, there is time for it.