Pandemic Pedagogy: Snapshots from a Year of COVID-Impacted Teaching in Three Artifacts
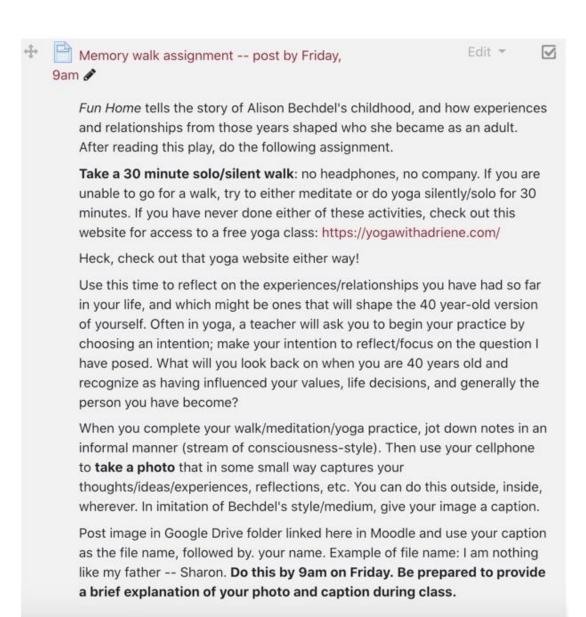
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This article describes my experiences navigating the terrain of pandemic pedagogy—also known as academic year 2020–21—through descriptions of three artifacts derived from instructional materials I designed for my courses. Along with the hardships, fear, and uncertainties that permeated students' lives, the pivot to remote and hybrid learning required redesigning most of my courses—their content, mode of delivery, and foundational priorities. Questions with which I grappled as I tackled this work included: How could my instructional design prioritize building community, respecting mental and physical health, and creatively engaging with the topics of the course—in that order? How could I acknowledge and validate students' experiences of loss, grief, and collective trauma and integrate that into my instructional design? Community-based performance has been part of my scholarly inquiry, artistic practice, and teaching responsibilities throughout my career. Perhaps because of this—or perhaps because it suits me—my pedagogy has always been deeply influenced by Paulo Freire's theory of dialogic education and its inherent respect for students as co-learners. That grounding prompted other questions: What if students' emotional experiences during the pandemic became the subject of their critical inquiry and intellectual labour? How could I create assignments and activities that would do this? These three artifacts are some of what remains from the year, documents of my labour as I sought—often struggled—to care for students and support their learning. I am sharing screenshots of each artifact in its original form, without additional editing.

Artifact #1: *Fun Home* Memory Walk

My design for student engagement with the musical *Fun Home* was inspired, in part, by a workshop I took several years ago with Doris Sommer, professor and director of the Cultural Agents Initiative at Harvard. One of the programs of the Initiative, "Pre-texts," promotes literacy and innovation through its central prompt: "use a text as material to make art and reflect on the process."[1] I asked students enrolled in my course, "Contemporary Female Playwrights," to complete the assignment described below—posted on Moodle, my institution's course management system—which would result in a "work of art," in this case, a photograph. Those photographs then became the basis of our reflection and analysis of Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori's adaptation of Alison Bechdel's graphic novel turned Tony Award–winning Broadway musical (Kron, Tesori, and Bechdel 2015). I first devised this assignment in the frantic days of March 2020 as students headed home and we abruptly shifted to online, remote learning. The version below was revised slightly for spring 2021 when I taught the course again, this time as a fully online course.

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My goal was to get students to engage in the *work* of the play: reflection and analysis of one's past that gives way to evocative memoir. The assignment asks them to "walk in Alison's footsteps" and replicates the play's dramatic action but shifts the subject of focus to themselves and their own lives. In the midst of the challenges wrought by COVID-19, I wanted to validate student experiences and emotional responses to those hardships by reminding them that they could be the subject of art, perhaps even great art. While Bechdel's creative medium is the graphic novel, I opted to assign a photograph—with a caption—because it is a modality that is familiar and accessible to all students.

I also wanted to give students the space and time to *reflect* deeply on what they are experiencing *right now*—this was the rationale for a walk in the woods or a yoga practice. Often, students are encouraged to complete assignments, write papers, and just generally "get it done." In these pandemic times, I wanted to emphasize the value of slowing down for reflection and acknowledge its capacity to deepen engagement with the course material. Further, "assigning" activities usually reserved for leisure was my way of reclaiming their value in augmenting creativity and analysis.

This assignment requires imaginative, creative, and reflective engagement—all forms of labour that, in higher education, have traditionally taken a back seat to other forms of intellectual labour. By making students' own lives and experiences the mechanism of connection to the text, I hoped to demonstrate to them the value of those as well. In this pandemic moment, placing value on one's *self* and emotional experiences could be accomplished in the classroom, not just outside it. My design of the assignment was also intentional in focusing students' imaginative labour to a point in time *after* the pandemic was over—"imagine yourselves at 40." Spending time—even if imaginatively—focused on a post-pandemic future was a way of reminding them that despite its seeming all-consuming nature, there *will be* a post-pandemic world.

Student work in response to this prompt was the centrepiece of our class discussion; each student introduced their captioned photo and described its significance. In April 2020, just weeks after students abruptly left campus and all courses shifted online, then-first-year student Katie Stewart shared this photo she titled, "Because I knew you, I have been changed for good."[2]

She shared that the quarantine had a direct impact on her interpretation of this assignment: "I am stuck at home due to the pandemic and surrounded by more childhood memories than I would be at college, so perhaps that is why, on my reflection walk, I thought about all the important people in my life and how they shaped the person I have become today—my photo reflects my deep gratitude for all of them."[3] In spring 2021, sophomore Anna Kate Daunt shared the photo below, which she captioned, "Still searching for meaning."

In class, she explained that while on her reflection walk, she came upon this flower, brought it back to her dorm room, and put it in a bowl filled with water. Only after doing so did she remember that her grandmother used to do something very similar: "She would constantly pick flowers and place them in a particular glass bowl and leave it on her windowsill. During my walk, I reflected on how my personal and familial history influence my present-day actions and decisions, and I realized the connection I possess to my ancestors exists in the person I already am today."[4] Both of these students shared something meaningful about who they are and who they imagine themselves becoming, which fueled our discussion of *Fun Home's* unique structure of representing three iterations of the same character at different moments in her life. While originally designed to compensate for the limits of personal and creative exchange I feared would be a part of online learning, a modified version of this assignment could fit into a future iteration of this course—whether taught online or in person.

Artifact #2: Engaging First-Year Students in the Language of Theatre

In fall 2020, I stepped into a new teaching responsibility as part of a team of six faculty members teaching an interdisciplinary humanities course for first-year students. The course enrolls approximately ninety students, and each faculty member takes responsibility for a three-week teaching unit inspired by the annual course theme. I joined this teaching team pre-pandemic, intending to develop a unit for the course's theme of "the body," that focused on community-based performance and Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed techniques. I planned to combine workshop-style practice-based work with historical and theoretical readings about the field, but in summer 2020, knowing the course would be taught fully in Zoom, I began to question my choices. With fall swiftly approaching and my colleagues' teaching units taking shape, I wondered, what if the things students have experienced and lost during the pandemic were made the subject of their inquiry? The introduction to Boal's techniques that I designed—facilitated four times, each with separate groups so I'd be able to see all participants on a single Zoom screen—did precisely this, and artifact #2 shared below is a snapshot from my planning notes.[5]

I began the workshop with exercises that introduced the basics of Boal's image theatre and then invited participants (my faculty colleagues joined the students) to consider a moment in their lives when they had experienced **isolation**. I asked them to choose a specific story they'd be comfortable sharing with a partner. In paired breakout rooms, each participant had three minutes to share their story while their partner actively and silently listened. They then switched roles. When everyone returned to the main room, with the video off, they made images in response to the story they *heard*;

specifically, I asked them to focus on how their partner was feeling at a specific moment in the story and create an image inspired by that. With everyone in the main Zoom room, I asked students to "pin" their partner's video—this Zoom function allows viewers to make a single person's Zoom square the only one visible to them—and had them share their images in their "semi-private" Zoom space. I then facilitated a few different activities—or, as Boal calls them, "dynamizations"—based on the images shared. For one dynamization, I asked participants to start with their image and add movement to create a rhythmic gesture. With everyone else's video turned off ("hide non-video participants" selected), and the Zoom screen as our makeshift stage, I invited students to share their gestures with others one at a time. I then invited anyone for whom the gesture resonated to turn on their video, come "onstage," and join in the gesture.

I planned this last step as a strategy to magnify one of Boal's central ideas—that an image starts in the specific experience of an individual but is also connected to the structures of power in which we all exist. But in this pandemic moment, the exercise intersected with my choice to focus on "isolation" in an unexpectedly moving way. One example of this was what happened when one student shared an image that, when dynamized, struck me as especially evocative of the deep pain of loneliness. I recall feeling a deep sadness watching him, as he so accurately embodied a feeling that I suspected many others were also experiencing at that time. But then, at my prompt—"if this gesture resonates for you and your experiences, come on stage and join in the action by doing the same rhythmic gesture"—first one, then gradually a dozen other students joined him onscreen, making the same gesture. There was something quite profound and moving that happened in that moment of performance—and in its unfolding, as each Zoom square popped up, one after the other—and it caught me off-guard. Watching a dozen bodies appear in a dozen small Zoom squares, simultaneously executing a gesture—each in their own way—inspired by an experience of isolation felt like a kind of solidarity. For the students to see that their peers were also experiencing these things and were willing to literally *stand with them* and say, with their bodies, "yea, me too, I felt that too," was more meaningful than I anticipated. Students made themselves vulnerable by sharing their emotional responses to experiences of isolation but found company and solidarity in that vulnerability. It was exactly the kind of togetherness we all needed; our bodies may not have been sharing the same physical space, but experientially and emotionally, we were deeply connected. It was a fleeting moment, for sure, but when, at the end of the workshop, I asked students to share a single word—written in the Zoom chat feature—that summed up the workshop experience for them, there was a flurry of "heard," "seen," "validated," "reassurance," and "community."

Artifact #2: From My Workshop Notes

> STEP 1: Prepare breakout rooms of 2 (with 8 minutes on the clock). Eyes closed think of moment/event in your life when you experienced ISOLATION. You are going to share a 2-3 minute story with partner. PARTNER STAYS silent—active listening, but no questions. I'll let you know when to switch roles, then partner tells a story. Last 2 minutes for questions.
> STEP 2: SEND TO ROOMS
> STEP 3: ALL RETURN. Turn video OFF. COME UP WITH IMAGE—focus on how your partner was feeling at a specific moment in the story and come up with image of that. RETURN TO NEUTRAL, and turn video back on
> STEP 4: ALL SHOW IMAGES.

STEP 4A: NOW: PIN your partner's video and PERSON A share the image you created.
Person B: TAKE A FEW Moments to observe your partner, and see/notice what they heard in your story. NOW PERSON B share image. Same process. •
STEP 5: UNPIN AND RETURN. AT least one pair volunteers to demonstrate some additional techniques we could use to dynamize the images.
STEP 6: As pair shows images, others put in chat—words that describe what you see when looking at these images.
STEP 7: Dynamize—add movement/gesture. SHARE one at a time.
STEP 8: ONE person turns on video, shares dynamized image. TELL ALL OTHERS: IF the image resonates for YOU, if you have felt this too, turn on video and join the person "onstage" by doing the same gesture.
STEP 9: IF TIME allows: demo other dynamizations.

Artifact #3: Story Circle Prompt

Artifact #3 comes from my fall 2020 course, "Community-Based Performance for Social Justice." A class session in early November was dedicated to introducing students to techniques for community storytelling, including story circles.[6] In advance of our class meeting, I let students know that I'd be leading a story-sharing process focused on the theme "the impact of COVID-19 on our lives." I intended to examine the ways in which the pandemic had exacerbated inequities in the US and the range of impacts it had on students' lives. The exercise from which this artifact derives is based on a model I learned from Norma Bowles, artistic director of Fringe Benefits, a theatre company that uses theatre "to promote constructive dialogue and action about diversity and discrimination issues."[7] Unlike my previous two artifacts, this one documents the use of a familiar form—the story circle—applied to a new subject and conducted in an unusual circular formation.

I taught this course in a hybrid format. As this class session was one of our few in-person meetings, we gathered in a socially distanced circle in our studio classroom. A slide deck prompted students to "raise their hand" if they identified with the experience described, and it guided our work together. Artifact #3, which appears below, is the first slide in the deck and asks students to "raise your hand if you have *heard of anyone* whose life has been impacted by COVID-19." Slides adhered to the same structure seen below, each with three prompts of increasingly personal impact; the last prompt on each slide asks students to identify if the person impacted was *themselves*. After each slide, students who had raised their hands were invited to share a story about their experience. There were five slides in the deck, and in the subsequent slides, "life" is replaced with: job; housing; future goals & career plans; and lastly, mental health and psychological well-being. It was close to the end of the semester, and I knew some students were experiencing isolation and depression. I knew some were having a tough time concentrating and getting work done. I had intended for the storytelling to validate and acknowledge the range of impacts the pandemic was having on people, even if our small class size inherently limited the range of those experiences. Students shared stories of parents losing jobs or being forced to change careers, dire housing situations, and loss of expected income from summer jobs that evaporated.

When I posed the prompt about mental health and psychological well-being, I expected that many of them would know people in their lives who were struggling. But I was also aware of the stigma that comes with acknowledging mental health struggles, especially on a small college campus, like the one at which I teach. Because of this, when I asked them to "raise your hand if that person is yourself," I didn't expect many to identify themselves. *Every single student* raised their hand. The amount of pain, the struggle, all of it—I hadn't known. I was surprised by this discovery, and suddenly, I was so emotionally overwhelmed, unexpectedly, by the fact that they *all* were suffering that I wasn't sure how to move forward. I had to stop, breathe deeply, acknowledge my own feelings, and thank them for their honesty and willingness to share such personal material with the class. While the next step in our story circle process would have been—as it was with each other prompt—inviting those with raised hands to share a story, I didn't do that here. Perhaps it was the wrong choice, but it felt too invasive to go further; perhaps my own emotional response interfered with my facilitation and teaching that day. The revelation that we all were struggling, I decided, was enough. I reiterated the sacredness of story-sharing and story circles, but that moment was a turning point in my understanding of the range and depth of the year's impact on students.

Reflection and Conclusion

While I have spent the bulk of my professional life separating my teaching from my parenting, this pandemic moment requires that I acknowledge their interconnectedness. When I first became a parent—as a pre-tenure faculty member at an institution that didn't offer maternity leave—I knew I had to "hide" my parenting duties and the inherent conflicts they created with evening work obligations, rehearsals, open houses, and numerous other requirements. It became so much a habit that I continued to do it beyond necessity; even after tenure, I deeply felt the conflict between my identity as a mother and as a professional with work obligations that extended beyond traditional work hours. But this year has shone a light on the many ways in which my teaching benefitted from the insights gleaned from witnessing the pandemic's impact on my kids' experiences (and perhaps my parenting benefitted as I learned about my students' experiences, but the jury is still out on that

one). My sons—in grades 8 and 12—are very different learners, and watching their struggles this year informed and tempered everything I did in my classroom, from course design to student meetings and assignment leniency.[8] Initially, and wrongly, I had assumed that students suffering emotional and educational losses were those whose families had experienced housing or food insecurity and those who lacked reliable Wi-Fi at home or a quiet place to work. My kids had all these advantages, so I was surprised to discover the multiple ways in which *they* were struggling this fall—but this discovery increased my compassion for my college students by helping me see through the cracks and navigate ways to accommodate their losses. Through my kids' eyes, I watched hopes, dreams, and aspirations evaporate. I saw social relationships strained, changed, or erased. I saw uncertainty, fear, and self-doubt seep into their lives in ways I never expected, along with the pessimism and despair that followed. And I felt deeply the limitations of my own capacity to mitigate these impacts.

The challenges faced by students and faculty this year were enormous and divergent, and my own can't be encapsulated in these artifacts; these "curricular remains" provide only a glimpse into strategies I designed and deployed, but there are many stories about this year that they do not reveal. They don't tell you about how I fumbled as I tried to learn new techniques to keep students engaged or the number of times I failed. They don't tell you how demoralizing it often felt when pedagogical efficacy was measured by the ability to master new digital tools. They also don't tell you that for me, this was a labour of love: I love my students, I love teaching, and I love thinking creatively about new ways to engage with theatrical material. But it was also extremely challenging to feel my central priorities in constant conflict with one another—respecting students' limits and maintaining focus on course learning goals posed difficult choices every week. Skills I have cultivated throughout my teaching career of more than twenty years—community-building, lesson planning, curricular design, identifying students struggling either with comprehension/mastery of course content or mental and physical well-being—were upended by Zoom and social distancing. I was never sure what would work and what wouldn't because I had *never done Zoom teaching before.* I implemented a brief "check-in activity" every class session, which I hoped would provide useful insight into students' mental and physical well-being. One of those included asking students to use their hands and the borders of their Zoom square to show me how they were feeling (first physically/bodily, then mentally/emotionally/spirit-wise) on a scale from 1 to 10. Was this effective? It helped me to stay informed and to know who I ought to check in on after class was over—but never having taught in Zoom before, I had nothing to which I could compare its efficacy.

Reflecting on the conditions of pandemic pedagogy in an April 2021 podcast, scholar Miriam Felton-Dansky argued that the pandemic demands a re-examination of the work we all did this year and its relationship to our institutions' survival: "we need some kind of institutional reckoning with labor and with inequities of labor" (Bay-Cheng 2021). Importantly, in the same podcast episode, scholar Leticia Ridley pointed out that academics and artists of colour were *already* navigating a crisis before the COVID-19 pandemic: "for a lot of students and for a lot of teachers, we've been in crisis, with Black life continuously being taken. . . . There are those of us who are in these institutions that are constantly under crisis . . . all the time." Inequity and crisis pre-date COVID-19 and were also amplified by the pandemic's concurrence with the killing of George Floyd and the subsequent surge in demands for racial justice. The reckoning with racial and labour inequities, the legacy of grief and loss for those of us who make and study live performance, and what it means to stay engaged in the work of teaching amid a global pandemic will be remembered by what we leave behind, and by what we change as we move forward.

Notes

1. https://www.pre-texts.org/.

2. Katie is intentionally referencing the lyrics from the song "For Good," from the musical *Wicked*.

3. Katie (Davidson College, class of 2023) kindly reminded me of this explanation in an email dated December 21, 2021.

4. Anna Kate (Davidson College, class of 2023) kindly reminded me of this explanation in an email dated December 10, 2021.

5. These evolved over the four workshops—though I tried to keep the experience similar for all students, I learned ways of more effectively engaging with the Zoom medium in each workshop and so tweaked subsequent workshops to take advantage of my own learning. Some of those tweaks are visible in the highlighted bits in artifact #2.

6. To read more about story circles, see Roadside Theater, "About: Story Circles," *Roadside Theater*, June 6, 2014, https://roadside.org/asset/about-story-circles. This was an assigned class reading for our session.

7. For more on Fringe Benefits Theatre, see: https://cootieshots.org/

8. This essay was written in May 2021, and these are the grades my kids were in at the time.

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