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Sheila Benson

University of Northern Iowa

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Maybe Elsa's Right: We Need to Let Some Things Go

SHEILA BENSON

University of Northern Iowa

Iowa winter is brutal. By mid-March, heading into spring break, everyone is ready for a change. Lucky students brag to their classmates about heading to Florida beaches. We toss around book titles we're finally going to have time to read FOR FUN!! Students are a little more relaxed, a little chattier.

Not mid-March 2020. Instead of happily anticipating a week's break from sub-zero polar vortexes, we spent that last Friday pre-break figuring out how we were going to manage a sudden shift online as the pandemic broke out. The conversation ran something like this:

"Thanks for filling out my technology survey so I know who has good Internet access. Here's my home phone number in case you can't email me. Please note this is a landline, so it does not receive texts. Yes, I still have a landline. I know things feel really weird and uncertain right now, but we've got a few minutes, so let's spend the rest of class time talking about this morning's assigned readings."

Meanwhile, the conversation inside my head ran something like this:

How in the WORLD are we going to do class discussion entirely online? I have students who don't regularly check email; what if they won't participate in our discussion board? What do I do if someone doesn't have Internet access? A lot of students said on the survey that they could just go to the public library or Panera; what if those aren't open? What if...? What if...? What if...?

I headed into that 2020 spring break, as we all did—with many worries. It didn't help matters that in my Survey of English

literature course, we were about to begin the 20th/21st Century, which has the toughest readings: Eliot, Joyce, Woolf—how were my students going to make sense of "The Wasteland" and that 8-page non-punctuated final sentence of *Ulysses* all on their own? Zoom was still an unknown factor at this point: Would it hold up under all the additional users who were about to join it?

A lot happened as the semester moved online, but for this essay I want to focus on our daily discussion posts, because they became a bit of magic. Not a perfect solution by any means. I'm not going to claim that this group of students understood "The Wasteland" better than any other semester's group, but what emerged in the discussion posts over the course of the next two months was a sense of vulnerability and a willingness to share personal feelings. That vulnerability helped us process the pandemic around us.

Because I'd struggled all semester to encourage this group of students to share thoughts in discussion, I anticipated a lot of "letter of the law" answers: Respond to the prompt, meet the requirements, end writing. Instead, I read emotionally charged writing. Students referenced one another by name in their responses to postings. They made deep personal connections to the day's readings. This was especially clear when we reached the WWI section of the syllabus. WWI poetry had traditionally been hard going discussion-wise in previous semesters. Not now. My students wrote much more than the word requirement I'd given for discussion postings. They admitted that they had no idea what it felt like to be in the trenches with shells flying overhead, but they felt like

they were in a battle. They related to Wilfred Owen's letter to his mother about not knowing what condition they would be in at the end of the day. They wrote of feeling trapped in their homes. They wrote of fear.

Discussions weren't about attendance or monitoring reading comprehension or points for a course grade. These discussions were about connection in an uncertain time. It almost didn't matter whether students responded to the specific prompt. What mattered was that they had a venue to reach out to fellow students (and me). We forged a community in a time when we were separated.

Students never built off one another's responses in our face-to-face discussions, but they willingly did it online. They addressed each other by name, and they thanked each other for being vulnerable and sharing their experiences and fears. They said things like, "I so relate to what you just shared. This pandemic is making everything uncertain." They acknowledged that this pandemic didn't require the same sorts of sacrifices as a world war, but they also drew many, many parallels. They expressed appreciation for frontline medical workers. And most of all, they wrote about their hope to eventually be on the other side of the pandemic.

The key element was vulnerability. None of us felt secure or knew what might happen next. Our class discussion board became a place to process, to vent, to project into the future. In a time when we couldn't see one another, those discussion posts were a place of connection, a place of (semi)normalcy.

What struck me about the spring 2020 semester was that, for the first time, students *cared* about the course readings and connected with them. They weren't just moving through a syllabus anymore. I think that happened partially because I got out of the way and let them relate to the material

the way *they* wanted to relate to it. Coverage was no longer an issue; we were focused on moving forward, putting one foot in front of the other.

As English teachers, we like nice, neat narrative structures. We like that plot arc with a neat resolution at the end. I can't provide that neat sense of resolution. What I *can* do, for what it's worth, is offer permission to myself and others. Permission to go off lesson plan. Permission to feel. To see what we do every day as a means of self-care if we allow it to be. Pandemic or no pandemic, we keep moving forward.