

The Constructed Body in a Disembodied Platform: Interdisciplinarity and Team Teaching in the Age of Covid-19

Jennifer Wu

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Allison Gose

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Jennifer Wu is a Caroline H. and Thomas S. Royster Fellow and PhD candidate in art history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She specializes in European art, 1400–1700, and her research interests focus on sixteenth-century portraiture in England. Jennifer currently teaches undergraduate courses on Italian Renaissance art.

Allison Gose is a Caroline H. and Thomas S. Royster Fellow and PhD candidate in history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her current research explores evolutions in early medieval monasticism and its relationship to larger social, political, and religious reforms in eighth- and ninth-century Europe.

IN THE SPRING OF 2020, OUR TEAM OF THREE PhD students taught an interdisciplinary first-year seminar at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The course, titled *In the Flesh: The Constructed Body in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, investigated the body through a sequential study of medieval European history, Italian Renaissance art, and English Renaissance literature. As in many institutions throughout the country, the unprecedented unfolding of the novel coronavirus dramatically transported our pedagogy to online instruction and changed our approach to team teaching. These five weeks of remote teaching challenged us as scholars and instructors but also offered some valuable take-aways about teaching the body in a disembodied, virtual platform.

During the pandemic, the emergency scenario quickly compelled our team to rearticulate the course objectives. Even before the crisis, we had different and, at times, competing ideas about interdisciplinarity, which was further compounded by the fact that none of us had significant team-teaching experience in higher education. There were moments of anxiety about the need to reinvent ourselves mid-semester. We braced for change, but we realized that our online transition was not about reinvention but staying true to our vision for each lesson: close reading, formal analysis, and interdisciplinary connections. Unexpectedly, the coplanning process for remote teaching became more efficient because we focused on our core objectives rather than experimented with new activities and modes of instruction.

The realignment from a face-to-face seminar to a virtual format did create obstacles. Based on polling about students' internet access as well as their family and work commitments due to the Covid-19 upheaval, we decided to use

asynchronous delivery. The team adhered to our twice-weekly course schedule by combining thirty-minute recorded Zoom lectures with online assignments. We typically reviewed and edited the PowerPoint lecture together and then recorded the video in one take. During the recording, we attempted to maintain the fluidity and conversational nature of the seminar environment by tapping into the strengths of the team-teaching format and modeling a class discussion. The lead instructor gave the lecture and displayed the PowerPoint presentation on the share-screen feature in Zoom, prompted the co-instructors with a few questions on the content and methodology, and the co-instructors responded with their own observations. These videos were then uploaded onto a learning management system (such as Sakai at UNC, or Canvas and Blackboard at other universities) at the start of our regular class period. The students watched this three-way discussion and proceeded to complete their assignments on Perusall, a free, online annotation tool.

Even though there are other learning tools available, Perusall was flexible enough to accommodate the annotation of both texts and images in an asynchronous format. The program features highlighting capabilities, which allows the students to exercise their skills in close reading by selecting excerpts for discussion. This feature, however, was more cumbersome for formal analysis because the highlighted areas obscured parts of the image. For each exercise, students were placed in small groups and were asked to respond to specific prompts from us, or to each other's posts. During the forty-eight-hour window in which students could complete the assignment, we checked in periodically and posted feedback to facilitate the discussion. Initially, we attempted to respond to each student's comment, yet we quickly learned that this was too time consuming and not sustainable. To manage this expectation, we assured students that we read all of their comments but would respond to each group rather than to individual posts. The recordkeeping capability of the annotating tool was an unanticipated benefit because students' ideas were saved and thus less ephemeral than in classroom discussions. This written data also provided timely instructional feedback that helped us better address students' particular areas of confusion.

Outside of the pedagogical and technical adjustments that we made, our classroom content coincided with current affairs. We reconvened after spring break with a previously planned art historical lecture, "Plague and Pestilence," on Italian fresco paintings of the Black Death and devotional images of saints. In this lesson, we also included an interdisciplinary excerpt from *The Decameron*. Despite the potential synergies between the course content and the pandemic, we decided to avoid direct discussion on this overlap, as we were concerned that students were overwhelmed by the immediate and stressful circumstances. It was not until our last lecture of the semester, on John Donne's *Devotions Among Emergent Occasions*, that we asked students to reflect on the relevance of the assigned primary sources and their experiences during the pandemic.

Donne writes in Meditation XXIII that it is hard to feel true compassion for those experiencing disease “we never felt in ourselves,” but that “when we have had these torments . . . ourselves, we tremble.” We may not know what it feels like to have typhus, but we all have experience being isolated because of an infectious disease. Did current events affect your reading of *Devotions*? Should scholars draw on experiences with coronavirus when analyzing *Devotions*—or not?

Although we were unsure about posing a potentially sensitive question, students shared thoughtfully about their personal experiences. Some students stated that their feelings of isolation and anxiety helped them to better understand Donne’s writings. Others took an alternative view by emphasizing the human capacity for empathy, even without experiencing a specific disease or illness. It was clear that students were eagerly and critically analyzing the extent to which they could connect their current lives with lessons from the past.

In our changeover to online teaching, there were barriers that we did not fully overcome. Our original syllabus, for instance, included a group activity and presentations to stimulate discussions around contemporary bodies and interdisciplinary teamwork. This project was eliminated because there was too much uncertainty surrounding students’ ability to form teams and work remotely. In addition to the streamlined course requirements, the asynchronous model did not allow for us to foster the same camaraderie with students. Since we did not see or talk with students for several weeks, this virtual environment was disorienting. The difficulty of teaching about the body without bodily presence is not without irony. Our class did not convene again synchronously until the final exam period. We used this time as an opportunity for reconnection and reflection on the course themes, interdisciplinarity, and remote learning. Based on student feedback and our own experience, we would strive in the future for a hybrid approach in which a portion of our class time would be facilitated synchronously to support community-building.

There were also some notable benefits to online teaching that will continue to influence our practice. As a teaching team, we found that online meetings were more convenient for coordinating and collaborating with each other than we had experienced earlier during the planning and teaching phases. In lieu of our usual weekly in-person meetings, the more frequent, but shorter durations of online contact were more effective. Moreover, one-on-one video conferencing helped us to strengthen our relationships with the students. Although some students were not as in touch with us as often as we would have liked, overall, the proportion of students who proactively requested video meetings was comparable to those who attended office hours during the first half of the semester. Students also noted their appreciation of this scheduling flexibility. Another positive development was that a few students who seemed to struggle in the classroom were much more consistent, detailed, and expressive in the online forum. Perhaps this was due

to some students' comfort level with writing in private versus speaking in large groups. Our online experience, therefore, confirmed the best practice of offering students various means of processing and communicating their learning. It suggests that the integration of specialized online tools with learning management systems would enhance face-to-face instruction. This diversified format provides students with a greater variety of ways to participate in class discussion and to demonstrate course commitment.

Despite the disruptions in traditional mediums of communication and the irreplaceable loss of face-to-face interaction, remote teaching enriched our experience as instructors. The emergency transition confirmed that some practices are compatible with both online and traditional classrooms, while others need to be reevaluated and refined. 🍌