H-**Diplo** ROUNDTABLE XXI-52

A Teaching Roundtable

On Teaching History amid COVID-19

Contents

Introduction by Nicole Phelps, University of Vermont

O ur three authors, writing from Singapore, West Virginia, and Oklahoma, share their experiences of the quick switch from in-person to remote teaching in Spring 2020, and I suspect that much of what they say will find readers nodding along, seeing their own experiences reflected in the contributors' stories. It certainly sounds familiar to me from my vantage point in Vermont, where I spent much of the spring semester helping faculty adapt their courses and then begin to prepare for the Fall 2020 semester in my role as a faculty associate at the University of Vermont's Center for Teaching and Learning. Perhaps faculty in bigger places—bigger in terms of student population, local population, or budget—fared somewhat better with respect to technology, but everyone who had to make the switch definitely faced some unprecedented challenges. Now we face the task of preparing for fall courses that will begin in the climate of the pandemic.

The contributions to this roundtable invite us to think about the content of our fall courses and the assignments we adopt, as well as how we will adapt to the limits of the technologies available to us.

One issue instructors will need to consider is how much attention they are going to give to public health issues and the pandemic in their content of their courses. In a first-year seminar on Big Questions: Happiness and Suffering at Singapore Management University, Wen-Qing Ngoei was able to tie the pandemic to course content on "pain talk"—the ways in which doctors and patients use metaphors to communicate and sometimes miscommunicate—and help the students develop a more nuanced understanding of objectivity claims in science. In switching a summer 2020 full US history survey from in-person to online, David Justice at Oklahoma State University is fully embracing the pandemic, bringing public health issues to the fore in course materials and reinforcing his regular "US in the World" approach with the idea that "diseases know no borders."

In surveys, focus groups, and informal conversations at the University of Vermont, students were divided in their opinions on the place the current pandemic should have in their coursework. Some students wanted to learn everything they could about the current pandemic. Others wanted their coursework—or at least some of their classes—to be a place where they could escape constant mention of it and think about other things. Although the pandemic cannot be ignored in the design of our courses because of the ways in which laws and regulations are shaping our access to campus, instructors do have choice about whether they engage with it in the intellectual content of their courses. Those with particular relevant expertise may want to lean in to the moment, redesigning their courses accordingly. Others who don't want to place so much of an emphasis on it for whatever reason might consider giving their students some choices in terms of readings and other assignments so that students who wish to connect the course to the present may do so, while those who need the course to do other intellectual—and perhaps mental health—work can pursue other topics.

All three of the authors discuss the problem of adapting in-person discussion to a remote environment. At West Virginia University, James Siekmeier shifted to discussion boards in his university's learning management system, and discussion boards also feature prominently in Justice's course at Oklahoma State. In Singapore, Ngoei used the chat function in their synchronous meeting platform, responding to some questions during class time and sending a longer email response afterward. With the right questions, student participation was of high quality, and some students who would not be comfortable contributing to an in-person discussion were more active.

In conversations about pedagogy, "lecture" and "discussion" are often held up as the two things that can go on during class time. They are typically presented as opposites, and "discussion" is usually considered superior because students are more actively engaged. I would be happy to make a case for the possibility of lectures actively engaging students—especially in History, where we have the power of storytelling on our side—but here I would instead invite instructors to think in a more nuanced way about what "discussion" means in the context of their particular courses so that they can more easily determine how they might achieve those ends in ways other than in-person conversation. In discussions, are students supposed to demonstrate their comprehension of a reading? To identify elements of structure in a reading? To make connections across readings, lectures, and/or other course materials? To articulate how they feel about the course material? To apply course

material to a real or hypothetical situation? There are, I am sure, many more possibilities. Checking comprehension might be done in an objective quiz in your learning management system; connections across readings might be done in well-phrased questions on a discussion board; personal opinions might be best done in a private journal that only the student and instructor can view. Being more specific about the purpose of discussion can help instructors adapt their courses to other delivery formats, and it also has the benefit of helping students determine what's important for them to pay attention to in readings, lectures, and other materials.

If instructors do shift in-person discussion to various forms of writing, keep in mind that writing requires a different kind of intellectual effort than informal speaking. Many students complained in the spring that, all of a sudden, there was more work in their courses, and when we probed that feedback at Vermont, a key issue was that students were being asked to do much more informal writing, such as contributing to discussion boards. For many students, that took more time, because they were working to craft more polished responses, in contrast to the more off-the-cuff, ideas-in-progress speaking that would happen in class. Some instructors found that using the synchronous chat function in their meeting platform was a reasonable way to split the difference, though it still had the problem of being unavailable to students who could not participate in synchronous activities. Regardless of the assignment structure they choose, instructors should make sure that their courses remain consistent with the workload required by their institution's definition of a credit hour.

What is possible in terms of discussion is directly related to another major theme that appears in all three of the contributions: the limits of technology. At all three institutions—and Vermont is certainly consistent with this, too—neither students nor faculty could rely on everyone having consistent, robust Internet access. Our authors adapted by using smaller files, and they also limited what was happening synchronously, with Ngoei restricting conversation to the chat and Justice and Siekmeier going fully asynchronous so that students could access the course materials on their own schedules. Being asynchronous also meant that they avoided the thorny issues of students being recorded and having to show aspects of their personal lives in the background of their video feeds.

The technology available to students and instructors at different institutions will continue to be uneven in the future, and even at institutions planning to bring everyone back in person for the fall, instructors should be prepared to pivot their courses again or have alternative paths through the course for students who fall ill, have major family care commitments, or who have limited access to technology. At some institutions, instructors will have more personal autonomy as to how they deliver their courses. As much as possible, I would encourage instructors to contact the specific students in their courses to find out what constraints those students are working under so courses can be adapted appropriately—ideally when the syllabus is still being constructed, rather than after the term starts. In the spring, most instructors were muddling through; in the fall, students, parents, and administrators are likely to have higher expectations.

Uneven access to technology and uneven knowledge about how to use the available technology was certainly a source of stress for both faculty and students in the spring, and that stress is not likely to be going away for the fall. I was quite struck when reading the contributions that another chief source of instructor stress did not get any mention: familial responsibilities. Hopefully, this omission is not due to the fact that the contributors are men. Shifting to remote instruction quickly took time, and designing courses that can pivot or that now need to be taught online also takes a tremendous amount of time. Under normal circumstances, that would be time that instructors were not spending on research or service. With the pandemic, it was time spent when there was a significant increase in other demands on instructors' time as child care centers and schools shut down and a wide variety of time- and labor-saving goods and services were no longer available. For the fall, some of those things are apparently coming back, but there are great uncertainties, and, again, unevenness depending on geographic location and personal circumstances. In adapting our teaching for the fall as the pandemic persists, I encourage instructors to do what they can to think holistically about their schedules so there is a greater possibility of balancing the demands of teaching with all of the other demands upon us and staying sane in the process. That holistic thinking should probably involve consulting with anyone who shares in their domestic responsibilities to make sure the division of labor is workable for everyone, as well as checking with departmental colleagues to make sure that service obligations are distributed as evenly as possible.

Best wishes for successful courses to all those teaching in the fall, and good health to the entire H-Diplo community!

Participants:

Nicole Phelps is an associate professor of history at the University of Vermont, where she teaches courses on US diplomatic history and historical methodology, among other topics. Her textbook on *Americans and International Affairs to 1921* is due out from Cognella in early 2021, and she is also the author of *U.S.-Habsburg Relations from 1815 to the Paris Peace Conference: Sovereignty Transformed* (Cambridge 2013). She is currently working on a book and digital history project on the US Consular Service in the long nineteenth century.

David A. Justice is an Adjunct Instructor at Oklahoma State University. He just recently received his Ph.D. from Oklahoma State. His research examines U.S.-Spain cultural diplomacy during the latter's transition to democracy in the 1970s and 1980s

Wen-Qing Ngoei is assistant professor of humanities at the Singapore Management University. He completed his Ph.D. in U.S. foreign relations history at Northwestern University. His articles have appeared in *Diplomatic History*, the *Journal of American-East Asian Relations,* and *International Journal.* Ngoei's first book, *Arc of Containment: Britain, the United States, and Anticommunism in Southeast Asia* (Cornell University Press) was published in 2019.

James F. Siekmeier is from Ann Arbor, MI, and attended public schools there. After graduating from Oberlin College, with honor, he received his M.A. and Ph.D. from Cornell, working under the direction of Walter LaFeber. He has taught in Washington, D.C., Iowa, Texas, and Bolivia (on two Fulbright Grants) and West Virginia. In addition, he helped compile five American Republics volumes of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, produced by the Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State. He is the author of four books, and is currently working on a project on the history of the U.S. "war on drugs" in the Andes.

Essay by David A. Justice, Oklahoma State University

The History Department at Oklahoma State University offers Survey of American History for incoming freshman. This class covers the entirety of United States history from the Bering Strait to the present. As instructor of record, I take a U.S. in the World perspective as I believe it provides students with an understanding that American history does not exist within a vacuum and makes them well rounded students of history. This is the course I have taught previously and will teach again as a July short course during the Summer 2020 semester. COVID-19 changed the instructional method, however, as the university decided all summer courses be taught online. Like all instructors moving from in-person to online courses in response to the spread of COVID-19, I had to decide what my course would look like. Would it be synchronous or asynchronous? Ultimately, I decided to make my short course asynchronous, but offer some synchronous elements. The major concerns I had in transitioning my July short course involved how to help students with unreliable internet service, how to facilitate lectures, whether to make students complete daily tasks or "binge" their work, and what to do with class discussions.

My principal worry is whether my students will have access to a stable Internet connection. Many states discovered during the transition to online instruction that some households lack a proper Internet connection. Oklahoma was no different. One survey revealed that almost one-quarter of public school students did not have access to Internet at their home.[1] My hopes are that students who are registering for the course now will have access to a stable Internet connection. Yet, what if those who do have Internet do not have the bandwidth to watch lecture videos? In case the students struggle to acquire a steady connection, I plan to have the textbook play a major role. In addition, I have PDFs of all the supplemental readings planned for the course, which include journal articles or essays. If students without Internet can access a hotspot or briefly receive an email, I can provide them with all the readings.

Second, I had to determine what to do with my lectures. How would I go about providing students with lectures? Do I replace face-to-face lectures with Zoom meetings, or provide the students with videoed lectures to watch at their own selected time? I decided it would be best to record lectures and provide them to the students to watch on their own accord. I wonder, however, with the longer class meetings of the July class, whether students would be able to sit in front of a computer for over three hours. This led me to consider breaking down the lectures into more manageable times. I took my normal lectures (made to fit a seventy-five-minute course period) and condensed them down into more concise fifteen-minute videos. For example, the Great Depression/New Deal class covered the economic collapse of the United States and the world, Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal politics, global responses to the Great Depression and the rise of totalitarianism, and the major cultural events of the 1930s. In planning the condensed lecture topics, I found that four shorter subjects were clear based on the above list. This also allowed me to dig in in further on topics that I had to gloss over. I could give students a more precise definition of fascism, the rise of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, and how the Spanish Civil War set the table for World War II alliances. Now that these videos are in a more palatable form, the students can focus on the topic at hand. Another issue quickly came to the forefront as I planned my condensed lectures. What about the videos that I show in class? Often, I utilize clips from documentaries, films, or music to provide students with context on the subject of that lecture. For instance, I show students the music videos of the Beach Boys to illustrate how experimental drugs affected society and music during the counterculture. They discover the wholesome group in matching outfits singing about love with "Barbara Ann," and then they witness the vibrant colors and effects of the "Good Vibrations" video. I discovered a tool in Canvas's Pages that allow me to embed YouTube videos alongside lecture videos. This allows me to put major themes in writing, allows students to then watch lectures, and open media clips for context afterwards.

Third, I had to consider the workload that I was requiring of my students. The July course is, unfortunately, a sprint not a marathon. A normal July class meets four days a week for three hours over four weeks. Students essentially learn a week's worth of material in a day, and a month's worth of material in a week. With this condensed schedule comes a daunting

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[1] Jennifer Palmer, "Shift to Distance Learning Highlights Stark Inequities in Internet Connection," *Oklahoma Watch*, 5 May 2020, https://oklahomawatch.org/2020/05/05/shift-to-distance-learning-highlights-stark-inequities-in-internet-connection/.

amount of work. As Kevin Gannon explains, we need to keep our students "engaged" and make them "feel present in the course and actively [working] with the course material."[2] Yet, I do not want to inundate my students with "busy work." Therefore, I had to consider the stress of a pandemic and quarantine on my students and how my course would help or hurt their mental health. I decided to let the grades for the course fall into three categories: quizzes, discussion boards, and book reviews. Students will take short 10-question quizzes that cover lectures, textbook, and supplemental materials to reinforce the subjects, participate in discussion board posts, and complete three to five-page reviews of David Igler's *The Great Ocean: Pacific Worlds from Captain Cook to the Gold Rush* and Walter LaFeber's *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*.[3] Instead of exacerbating students' mental pressures to cram materials to achieve a high grade on a high-stakes assessment, this design allows students to show their mastery of the course through their written work. Furthermore, by making the class asynchronistic, it is up to the students how they participate in the class. If students feel they learn better by keeping a strict schedule, they can. If students feel they can handle absorbing all the information in a single day, they have that option.

Finally, I had concerns about how to implement in-class discussions. I often display paintings, posters, film clips, and music during my lectures. I ask students to interact with these primary sources, which then leads to class discussions. For example, during the U.S. Empire lecture, I put Louis Dalrymple's painting "School begins," ask the students to write down what imagery they see in the painting, discuss their findings with their cohort, and then bring it back for a larger discussion of race in U.S. empire.[4] An asynchronistic course makes these necessary and enlightening discussions difficult to implement. This is where discussion boards come in. Students can post their interpretations and insights in their main post, and then agree or disagree with their replies to their classmates' original posts. Another hurdle I had to consider was what to do with my book discussions. In the previous classes I devoted two days for mandatory book discussions to help students who may not have fully grasped the text or to allow those that really loved/hated the book to have their reasons heard. For example, during a discussion on LaFeber's *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, students got into a healthy debate as to whether or not the 1980s and 1990s were a second Gilded Age and figures like business magnates Ted Turner and Bill Gates were new robber barons. (Though I suspect this year's discussion will focus heavily on Jordan and the Bulls thanks to ESPN's engrossing documentary *The Last Dance*.) This is where I had to introduce a synchronous approach. I will offer a window of time for the students to meet in a Zoom meeting that will essentially replicate the in-class discussions.

World War I provides the best model of how I adapted my July course to be asynchronistic and address the major concerns that I had. I divided my lecture notes into topics such as the Causes of the Great War, Soldiers' Experiences in the Great War, the influenza pandemic, and the Wilsonian Moment. To replace an in-class discussion on World War I propaganda posters, I placed the posters in the course shell on Canvas and asked the students to respond to questions normally asked: What is this poster trying to say? What are the racial and/or gender undertones? How can we see nationalism in these posters?[5] Finally, I provide my students with supplemental readings and videos on the 1918 influenza pandemic. These

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[2] Kevin Gannon, "Use What You Know," 18 March 2020, https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2020/use-what-you-know-online-teaching-tools.

[3] David Igler, *the Great Ocean: Pacific Worlds from Captain Cook to the Gold Rush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Walter LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, expanded edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002).

[4] Link to "School begins," https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2012647459/.

[5] The posters are from the Library of Congress: https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/wwipos/background.html.

include a JSTOR article that contains 1918-1919 reporting of the flu and the *American Experience* documentary on the 1918 pandemic.[6]

With the backdrop of a global pandemic, I believed it was integral for my students to understand both the situation they are currently experiencing as well as the historical precedents. To provide context, I integrated stories of viruses and infectious diseases, epidemics, and quarantines in both the United States and the world. I stress to students in one lecture that diseases know no borders. At least one global health crisis or public health initiative is covered during each week. Colonization and the spread of disease feature prominently in the first week. Students will examine how diseases spread through Native American tribes. In addition, students will learn of the spread of diseases in Pacific tribes by reading Igler's *The Great Ocean*. Though I chose this monograph before COVID-19 arose, the second chapter now holds more implications. Igler highlights the impact of diseases like tuberculosis and typhoid fever on Native tribes in the Pacific world, but he focuses his argument on the effects of venereal diseases that produced "what were likely the leading causes of depopulation: infertility and chronic ill health."[7] In the second week of class, students will examine the role of U.S. Army surgeon William Gorgas and the fight to end yellow fever. During a lecture on the Spanish-American War, I inform students of Gorgas's implementation of mosquito control to help eliminate yellow fever in Havana, Cuba and during construction of the Panama Canal. Also in week two, I begin to illustrate the importance of public health initiatives. I discuss how sanitation became important during the Gilded Age with the construction of New York City sewers based on the schematics of the London sewer systems.[8] The third week will help draw the strongest parallels to COVID-19 with discussion of the 1918 influenza pandemic. My previous lectures of World War I often hint toward the flu that year, why it was called the "Spanish flu," and the death toll during the war. However, due to these current circumstances, I have dramatically expanded the information and turned the pandemic of 1918 into its own lecture. In this lecture I provide students with essays that examine how a parade in Philadelphia during the height of the flu led to 12,000 deaths in six weeks, and how Tucson enforced a face mask requirement. In the final week, students will examine the impact of the HIV/AIDs epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s. Students learn how the reluctance to provide research funding or public information on HIV exacerbated the spread of the disease as well as the personal stories of HIV/AIDS activist David Kirby and teenage Ryan White.[9] Ultimately, I would like my students to leave the July course with an understanding of how diseases spread without borders, the importance of public health, and the responses of the world to global pandemics.

While the shift to online courses due to COVID-19 is challenging, in both senses of the word, we cannot lose focus of the most important part of the university experience: the students. We are all experiencing this crisis together, and we must consider how this pandemic is affecting this generation of students. They were born before and during the 9/11 attacks, went through schooling during two different wars (one that is still ongoing), and are now witnessing a global pandemic. We have to consider how this will affect their education, and we must do our best to assist these students and their mental health. Patience, compassion, and understanding will be needed with students and assignments. Faculty and instructors made the pivot from in-class to online in a matter of weeks for the spring semester. This included growing pains as what to do with lectures, how to give examinations, and how to make sure students were maintaining the course schedule. However,

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[6] Matthew Wills, "The Flu Pandemic of 1918, as Reported in 1918," 15 January 2018, https://daily.jstor.org/the-flu-pandemic-of-1918-as-reported-in-1918/; *American Experience: Influenza 1918* https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/influenza/#part01.

[7] David Igler, *The Great Ocean: Pacific Worlds from Captain Cook to the Gold Rush*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 58.

[8] One essay I provide students is about the origins of the Department of Sanitation in New York. "A Filthy History: When New Yorkers Lived Knee-Deep in Trash" by Hunter Oatman-Stanford. https://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/when-new-yorkers-lived-knee-deep-in-trash/.

[9] I provide students with this source as well. Tom Crewe's "Here Was a Plague." https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n18/tom-crewe/here-was-a-plague.

instructors now have the experience of the spring semester to benefit those enrolled in the summer and fall semesters. Planning to adapt to COVID-19 allows instructors to show students the wide breadth of historical sources. We can provide them with primary sources such as newspaper accounts of the 1918 influenza pandemic and music of the counterculture. We can also illustrate the importance of digital history by connecting students with historical websites, digital museums, and primary source repositories online. As diplomatic historians, we can provide our students with the tools to understand that diseases know no borders, and how global public health plays a role in surviving pandemics.

ESSAY BY WEN-QING NGOEI, SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

I am a historian of U.S. foreign relations. As assistant professor of humanities in the Office of Core Curriculum at the Singapore Management University (SMU), I teach *Big Questions*, a course that all freshmen are required to take. My students hail from SMU's schools of Accountancy, Business, Economics, Information Systems, Law, and the Social Sciences.

Before getting into the complications that COVID-19 brought to my teaching, I should address the simple question I am often asked: "What exactly is *Big Questions*?" My answer draws from my experience of teaching the course (this is its inaugural year) and the webpage of the Office of Core Curriculum.[1] *Big Questions* offers students an inter-disciplinary exploration of the fundamental debates that we must all grapple with in this life. These debates concern our worldview, sense of purpose and relationships, and shape our decision-making and actions. *Big Questions* rotates through different themes and this year's theme is "Happiness and Suffering." At the beginning of term, I explained to my students that our internal deliberations over how to maximize our happiness and minimize our suffering, our inner debates (and conversations with others) about the contested meanings of happiness and suffering, and how these terms intersect with our (and society's) ideas about success, failure, security and fear, boil down to the question of: "What is the good life?" And this is a *big* question, I pointed out, because we will be asking and trying to answer some version of it throughout our lives. To make these ideas more concrete for my students, I suggested variations of this big question that they would likely have encountered: what major they chose to pursue at the university (because of what jobs and idealized lives they sought beyond graduation); what kinds of people they seek as friends; and, in the longer term, what they strive to achieve in life (and what sacrifices they will make for it).

The "Happiness and Suffering" syllabus is designed by faculty from different disciplines. As such, the freshmen will read works that approach the question of "what is the good life" from a variety of perspectives, from the philosophical and the psychological to the historical, linguistic, economic, and much more. Instructors are permitted to change some of the assigned readings or choose different works by the authors whom the syllabus team proposes. Though not representative of the complete syllabus, here are a few examples. (Please excuse the inevitable simplifications in this summary.) My students read from Darrin McMahon's study of the history of happiness, focusing on its contested and evolving meanings through time.[2] They were also introduced to utilitarianism in the writings of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, which encouraged them to revisit their calculi for maximizing pleasure.[3] The reading list included a brush with Jean-Paul Sartre's thoughts on existentialism and his argument that individuals are free to make their own meaning of, and achieve happiness in, their lives.[4] Additionally, the list included excerpts from Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, Yogi Sadhguru's *Inner Engineering*, Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*, and studies of pain talk by historian Joanna Bourke and English literature expert Lucy Bending.[5] Classes were structured to include brief content lectures but emphasized seminar-

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[1] Office of Core Curriculum (Singapore Management University), "Big Questions":
https://www.smu.edu.sg/programmes/core-curriculum/course-structure/big-questions

[2] Darrin M. McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (New York: Grove Press, 2006).

[3] Jeremy Bentham, *Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham, Volume 4: October 1788 to December 1793,* edited by Alexander Taylor Milne (London: University College of London Press, 2017); John Stuart Mill, "Higher and Lower Pleasures," in *Ethics,* ed. Peter Singer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 201-205.

[4] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973).

[5] Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Sadhguru, *Inner Engineering: A Yogi's Guide to Joy* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2016); Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrer, Giroux & Strauss, 2003); Joanna Bourke, "What is Pain? A History: The Prothero Lecture," *Transactions of the Royal History Society* 23 (2013): 155-173; Lucy Bending,

style discussion. A few lectures to the entire cohort by visiting speakers, and a field trip arranged for each class,were other important features of the *Big Questions* experience. Above all, I had been confident that face-to-face discussions would provide ideal conditions for my students to deeply engage the works of the course, learn from each other, and wrestle with their worldviews of what constituted the good life.

In mid-February, when I had conducted just four face-to-face lessons, the COVID-19 pandemic saw all my classes moved online to WebEx, a platform similar to Zoom. This was a decision of the university's administration. It pre-empted the Singapore government's version of the 'shelter-in-place' policy (here, it was termed a 'circuit breaker'), which would only be implemented in the country more than a month later, a few days after my final online class. Much of my experience teaching amid COVID-19 thus had to do with navigating the transition to online classes, specifically the questions of how to streamline content delivery and cope with being unable to conduct face-to-face lessons. However, as I discuss further below, the pandemic also provided a compelling context to discuss the history of pain talk.

For better or worse, I decided against trying to replicate the immediacy and intimacy of a classroom discussion through WebEx, judging that the platform did not have the capacity for it. I crafted shorter, stripped-down lessons. My PowerPoint slides carried only text that resembled study notes, contained no images, but were accompanied by my live video lecture. My online lessons had no segues to YouTube videos that I would have ordinarily used in face-to-face classes to offer alternate or visual illustrations of my points. Also, with some reservation, I informed my students that I would mute them throughout my WebEx class since I expected that allowing them to individually speak up would strain the online platform and the connection. My imperfect substitute for in-class discussion was WebEx's typed chat function. I requested that my students enter their comments and questions at various stages in the lesson such as after I had explained a particular concept from the readings. As my students' comments began appearing in the WebEx chat box, I would attempt to extract and verbally address those concerns which emerged with greatest frequency, while also drawing the typed discussion back toward the themes of the course. I then tried, to the extent it was possible on the fly, to distil the 'discussion' into a few takeaways that I quickly typed onto a slide. Following each WebEx lesson, I uploaded my slides to our equivalent of Blackboard and Canvas. In addition, I invited students to submit further thoughts and questions about the class, endeavoring to respond within a few days to the big issues that surfaced. My response came in the form of a very long email to the entire class.

In preparing for the above, I recognized from the outset what many will consider regressive tendencies in my approach to online teaching, from under-utilizing information technology to eschewing student-centered learning and diminishing their engagement by muting their voices. Of course, I was deeply anxious about these pedagogical decisions. But I was also following a hunch that my no-frills lessons might actually lower the barriers to student participation in discussions and even increase their engagement of the themes and readings. Indeed, I received a few emails from students in the second half of term that they could now follow my slides more easily, that they appreciated the long emails I sent, and that—absent the sometimes intimidating environment of face-to-face lessons—they could more readily "speak up" in class via the WebEx chat box.

Formal student feedback at the end of the semester confirmed that these views were shared by the majority. A large number of my students were very positive about the no-frills PowerPoint slides I used and underscored that my long emails had helped substantially with consolidating their learning. In particular, most students remarked that entering comments into the WebEx chat (instead of having to verbalize) gave them more time to process their ideas, formulate their words with more care, and respond more thoughtfully to each other. There was indeed a sharp uptick in the number of students volunteering their thoughts in the chat box compared with the face-to-face lessons, though this trend had started just prior to classes moving online. And I did find that the students were more probing, engaged and vigorous in these chat box discussions, though their exchange of ideas was sometimes hampered by the responses automatically scrolling upward until they were out of sight, leaving some questions unanswered or some students repeating identical ideas minutes apart because

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"Approximation, Suggestion, and Analogy: Translating Pain into Language," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 36:1, Translation (2006): 131-137.

they had not seen earlier comments. Only one or two students took issue with being muted. I was pleasantly surprised that my hunch had been reliable.

Even so, I could not ignore the frustration that some students expressed with the different quality of interaction in these online classes, particularly their conviction that there could be no substitute for face-to-face lessons. At any rate, I had always conceived of these WebEx lessons as a stopgap measure to be revisited at the close of term, anticipating that I may have to teach online throughout the next semester and beyond. No doubt, keeping the students muted all term long is unsustainable and undesirable. With more weeks of the semester available the next time, I will have opportunities to use WebEx to interact with small breakout groups of the class. But the largely positive student response to my online teaching this semester signals that I should worry less about reproducing the exact conditions of face-to-face lessons even as I explore new ways to streamline my content delivery. More to the point, the present pandemic—and the likelihood of similar disruptions in the future—has convinced me that I can no longer put face-to-face lessons on a pedestal while assuming that teaching online is an inferior substitute. I plan to blend both (or more) types of instruction into my teaching practice in preparation for the uncertainties ahead.

Importantly, COVID-19 provided an opportunity to discuss pain talk in history, and in a class that happened to be my first online lesson of the term. Judging by my students' comments in the WebEx chat box, quite a number found Bourke's and Bending's writing on suffering somewhat challenging. Both scholars advocate the merits of using the full richness of language to express one's pain. Studying an individual's diary entries, Bending offers compelling evidence that the experience of suffering is not ineffable. Bourke, who had visited SMU in February to deliver a lecture based on her essay, situates pain talk within the historical context of the professionalization of medicine, revealing the tension between scientific terms that doctors utilize and an individual's metaphorical descriptions of personal suffering. Understandably, many students accustomed to seeing scientific terms as the embodiment of objective reality were initially resistant to Bending's and Bourke's arguments—their comments centered on how scientific terms allowed for precise diagnoses, a 'true' understanding of the patient and, thereby, standardized treatment. In this vein, many held that metaphorical language meant indulging patients' subjectivity (more unreliable due to their suffering), leading to misunderstandings in communication and even the wrong treatment.

Here, one aspect of the unfolding pandemic enabled me to encourage my students to reconsider their binary views of scientific and metaphorical language. At the time of my class, COVID-19 was but one of the several names for the virus circulating in the news. Other terms in the media included the Wuhan virus and NCov, an abbreviation of novel-coronavirus. I explained to my students that each of these terms was, in effect, a metaphor, a use of language to approximately represent the reality and not the objective reality itself. The transition from naming the disease the Wuhan virus—the racist undertones of the term notwithstanding—to merely using 'novel' to differentiate this coronavirus from its relatives was really a string of approximations. As some of my students began to realize, any and every newly discovered coronavirus is novel! And the term COVID-19, I pointed out, was neither an obvious improvement nor proof of scientific progress, for it was simply made of letters and numbers borrowed from "COronaVIrusDisease-2019." With this in mind, I emphasized that my students should reconcile themselves to how scientific terms were not worlds apart from, or more exact, than the metaphorical language they once thought subjective and unreliable.

The above discussion helped my students to also understand that pain talk at its core, when viewed through the history of the professionalization of medicine (courtesy of Bourke's essay), was about empowerment and empathy. I urged my students to recognize that individuals in pain would feel empowered by the chance to use metaphorical language to express their personalized suffering. Indeed, having to shoehorn their particular experience into a limited repertoire of scientific terms offered by a medical professional, and finding their non-scientific metaphors sidelined as unreliable, would surely have the opposite effect. It might even chill a suffering person's efforts to seek care in the first place. More troublingly, discounting individuals' metaphorical expressions of their pain could excuse medical professionals (and us, too) from going at least halfway to meet those who are suffering, from exercising empathy when and where it is most needed.

Subsequently, I learned from formal student feedback and saw in many of my students' final papers that this particular lesson on pain talk had profoundly affected their worldviews (for the better, it seemed). I greeted this with no small amount of relief. Looking back on this first of my WebEx lessons, a critical juncture when keeping my students engaged might have been most difficult, the distressing context of the COVID-19 pandemic also likely eased the communication of the above takeaways from the history of pain talk. Indeed, *Big Questions* was conceived for such teachable moments, its inter-disciplinary nature and critical reflexivity meant to encourage students to go beyond consuming and dissecting knowledge to integrating their classroom learning with their experience as individuals and members of a broader community. As I pointed out in my long email to conclude this discussion, we can all do a better job of soothing the suffering of our fellows if we nurture a culture of openness to pain talk. Thereby, we may experience a closer approximation of the pain of others and, hopefully, offer our care and support to them more effectively.

Essay by James F. Siekmeier, West Virginia University[1]

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, there was a lot of material on various websites with regard to how to make the quick transition to on-line teaching. In addition, I received emails on the topic of mid-semester conversion to on-line teaching as a member of SHAFR's Teaching Committee. After reading some of this material, it became apparent that much of it was not applicable to my current teaching situation. Then, the question became: given the structural constraints of my lack of computer skills, and the university's lack of server space for on-line delivery of courses, not to mention balancing child-care and working from home, how could I simultaneously continue to maintain student engagement and high-quality instruction?

As I adjusted to on-line teaching, I found that my own lack of computer skills, and the structural constraints I was operating under, actually formed a felicitous convergence. That is to say, the sage advice given to me by my Administration was to not assume that my students had ready access to reliable, let alone high speed, internet service. Soon, I discovered that assumption was correct. At the same time, because I did not have the time or inclination to develop computer skills, my on-line delivery of material would not have a lot of "bells and whistles," which might have led to the creation of large computer files, which are difficult for the university server to maintain and difficult for students to download and open with possibly-sketchy internet service. Thus, I did not have the ability to do fancy things on-line; and some students, due to a lack of robust internet, would not be able to access that fanciness anyway. By way of analogy, I thought back to a study-abroad trip I led to Cochabamba, Bolivia, a few years back, and the students' difficulty accessing/downloading large files with the poor internet service there at that time. After a while, they gave up attempting to download large files in a small-bandwidth environment. We agreed that we might as well just see the sights; and talk to each other (not options of course for a COVID-required transition to on-line instruction).

For me, because my university's course-website platform/software was not Cloud-based, server space was limited. (Also, since the system was not Cloud-based, it behooved me to keep a backup of my gradebook.) As such, synchronous-delivery teaching was strongly discouraged, at least for some disciplines, including history. With asynchronous delivery, there are fewer options to choose from with regard to providing material, which is a relief for Luddites like myself. I investigated voice-overs for power points, and recording and uploading lectures. Instead of voice overs, and recording and uploading lectures, I decided to provide streamlined power points, with the main points clearly stated at the beginning, and questions at the end. As one of my former colleagues characterized himself, he was not 'high tech' or 'low tech,' but instead 'medium-tech.' That sums up my approach perfectly.

My goals for the rest of the semester were to maintain student engagement while providing high-quality content in an interesting way, and ensuring they received timely feedback on their rough drafts of their papers that they would submit through Turnitin, the software they would use to]submit their drafts on-line. First, in terms of student engagement, it is important to start out with an important if obvious point: because the transition to on-line teaching occurred so quickly, teachers did not have sufficient time to thoroughly go over the importance of both maintaining an engaging classroom experience, and how, specifically, that would be done. As a History Department faculty, we had a couple of meetings to discuss best practices for teaching on line: and one important technique was to check periodically to see which students were logging into the system, and which were not. Not surprisingly, the ones who had "drifted away" before COVID-19 remained unconnected; fortunately, those that had maintained solid participation pre-COVID were regularly logging into the e-campus site. Also, giving specific instructions to the students with regard to the importance of both quality and quantity of on-line posts was important. As to ensuring that comments on the discussion board were focused: each week I posted a couple of questions for them to consider about that week's readings. The trick, of course, then became to come up with questions that are the right level of analysis: not too specific; nor to broad. I did respond to some student posts, emphasizing what I thought was of value in their posts, and then adding my "take" on the issue at hand, in a way that keeps the

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conversation going. Because they did a good job in responding to each other, while keeping the conversation "on track" I did not feel I had to respond to individual student responses very much.

Moreover, even though before the transition to on-line delivery, I had told students to feel free to email me any time they had questions, I reminded them of that again as we transitioned to virtual teaching. While I generally encourage emails as opposed to phone calls, I offered to be available by phone, or Zoom.

Second, regarding how to deliver content in an effective way: the question became how to tailor the power points to provide effective on-line delivery. When teaching with power points in class I like to show a number of images, and ask the students to reflect on them. How to replicate this experience on-line? I could not come up with a technique at the time: but, now, after the end of the semester, I have an idea. I would have simply asked them to free-write, in their notes, on how the image speaks to them. With regard to my decision to rely solely on power points without a voice-over to emphasize my points, the student evaluations revealed that this was a good decision. Third, with regard to their submission of papers through Turnitin: because it is a straightforward way of submitting papers on-line, even students without experience with on-line submission of papers found it easy to use. Also, I told them that if they received error messages in attempting to turn in their papers, they could always turn them in to me by email.

What can we learn from the conversion to on-line teaching during Spring 2020? The immediate concern, at this writing, is how to prepare for Fall 2020. Although our administration intends to begin the fall semester on campus, we might have to switch to on-line teaching mid-stream. First of all, it is important to be accommodating with regard to student problems in a rapid transition to on-line learning. Moreover, if students have to care for ill family members, or are ill themselves, it is of course a significant hardship which needs to be accommodated. Our administration informed us from the beginning of the importance of accommodating student problems. Indeed, in Spring 2020, I received a handful of emails from students who had to care for ill family members, as well as from students with sketchy internet service.

The single most important thing I wish I had done in Spring 2020 would have been to clearly lay out for students, as soon as I knew that we would be moving on-line, how that transition would take place, and what my expectations were for an on-line classroom experience. Emphasizing that students understand the importance of maintaining engagement in the class over the duration of the entire semester I think is very important. An analogy from sports would be that winning teams are not necessarily those with the most physical ability; often it is the team that maintains its focus until the final buzzer that ultimately triumphs.