



## In Defense of Facelessness

Not In-Person but Not Impersonal

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Before COVID-19 moved us all abruptly online in March 2020, I was adamantly opposed to teaching online. I had twenty years of experience teaching in person, I was good at it, and I was resistant to administrative pressures to offer online courses.<sup>1</sup> I couldn't imagine how I would get to know students, understand their reactions, create community—all online, without a physical presence, without seeing their faces.

And during that spring 2020 semester I didn't necessarily succeed at those things. That first half-semester I taught online depended very much on good will remaining from the in-person beginning to the semester. The students who were able to do well in this new environment did so, and those who weren't able to do so fell away, despite my best efforts to reach out to them. I managed things in whatever ways I could, and we muddled through.

But in fall 2020, so that I could stay home with my two young children and keep them safe, I chose to teach online. Asynchronously. I would not have any face-to-face contact with my classes, not even over Zoom. How could I possibly do this? Would my courses lose rigor or meaning? Would students still enjoy them? Would I?

These questions worried me as I planned my courses, but I soon realized that I was asking the wrong questions. Instead of asking about what I'd lose, I started asking what courses taught in this format could gain. Instead of asking how to do without particular techniques that I'd grown attached to, I started asking what other techniques are available.

I had been having a serious failure of both memory and imagination. After all, I have made friends online. I have started serious relationships online. I maintain many of my most meaningful friendships online. Of course I can get to know students in that space, too! Facial expressions, after all, are only one way to read reactions. And they are not foolproof—I have known many students who glare at me all through class only to later say that they love the class and are so excited about the topic, and I’ve known many students who smile politely all semester only to skewer me on the student evaluations. We like to believe that we can really know our students by reading their faces and their body language, and, to be sure, this is a skill that many teachers have developed to an extent, but students are not transparent to our readings—whether intentionally or unintentionally—and physical proximity is not a cure-all.

Other modes exist.

But they are hard to create in learning management system (LMS) spaces. My university’s LMS is not intuitive. It’s clunky. And—perhaps worst of all—it feels like “learning management” instead of like a conversation or like real learning. Even the most invested students in spring 2020 had trouble keeping conversations going on LMS discussion boards, and the method of assigning grades to specific numbers of comments/responses made discussion measurable but not pleasurable. Ultimately, creating a class space that could be engaging and enjoyable required me to think differently about teaching. I had to go beyond thinking about where and when I taught to also consider my role as teacher and my presence in the class space.

### **Faceless and Gradeless**

This rethinking of my role became part of a shift in my teaching that began before COVID-19. The move to teaching online coincided with a move away from traditional grading, and I am not sure I can fully disentangle the two. I had been using contract grading in my composition courses for a couple of years but hadn’t extended the practice into my other classes yet.<sup>2</sup> I began using this grading model primarily because I felt that “grading was something to be managed, something to be survived. It was the worst part of the job, often the only truly bad of the job, but it was just one of those things you had to do, right?” (Warner 2020: 206). I hated it and found myself putting it off, but I was happy to provide feedback for students—both in writing and in person—as long as I didn’t have to actually assign it a grade. Vicki Reitenauer (2019: 104) argues that this approach can be freeing, allowing instructors to “respond authentically and directly to the efforts they put forward pre-

cisely because [they are] not reducing that response to a letter grade,” which describes exactly the effect that moving away from grades had on me. I was able to give feedback more quickly and more gladly.

Although eliminating grades feels good to me, removing familiar rankings makes many students nervous, so it cannot be simply about my feelings. Fortunately, there are real benefits for students, too: providing feedback without grades allows us to talk more candidly about strengths and weaknesses in their work and their own personal goals, and it puts me in the position of writing coach rather than arbiter of quality. This does not remove the student/teacher power dynamic but does mitigate it somewhat. In short, we are able to communicate as people. Jesse Stommel (2017) writes that “grades (and institutional rankings) are currency for a capitalist system that reduces teaching and learning to a mere transaction. Grading is a massive co-ordinated effort to take humans out of the educational process.” Removing grades, therefore, helps put the humans—and the human interaction—back into the educational process.

Nevertheless, I wasn’t sure at first if I wanted to continue with this model as my courses moved online. A part of me worried that it would be too many new elements at once (for the students, if not for me). Should I just deal with the online format and leave traditional grading alone?

The training I was provided for teaching online pushed in this direction, taking for granted that traditional grading was the way to go and that online courses can be—and therefore must be—quantified, even automated, using the technologies available. The weeklong teaching-online course offered by my university focused primarily on using our LMS to track and assess students, with a secondary emphasis (growing out of other faculty members’ anxieties) on preventing cheating in this mode. After sitting through many discussions of how to design rubrics to grade specific assignments, however, my oppositional tendencies kicked in.

Instead of letting teaching online become even more quantifiable, I made the conscious decision to remove as much of the quantification as possible from my online classes. LMS technologies inherently focus on quantification because they can do no more on their own than keep track of what tasks each student has completed, treating all students identically (no matter their individual goals or challenges), and because they insist on recording grades for assignments. My writing and communication courses went gradeless (as far as possible, given the need for final grades) in fall 2020, and all my classes did so in spring 2021. I refused to quantify and automate students’ learning; I insisted on making it about them as individuals as far as I was able to.

This meant that I needed ways to communicate to students how they were doing, to make sure they felt connected to the class, and to develop methods of assessment that could lead to a final grade at the end of the semester. When the work of a class can be boiled down into checking boxes (I commented twice today, submitted the assignment, and am done for the week), it is easy to become disconnected from it and to see it as a chore. That's not conducive to meaningful and long-lasting learning. On the other hand, when students develop expectations for participation themselves and get regular feedback both from me and from other students in class, it is easier to feel part of a community and to find reasons to come back. It's easier to care about the class and then, hopefully, to remember the learning of the semester.

I find it, therefore, nearly impossible to divorce the technological elements of my online courses from their philosophical underpinnings. Moving online—for me—meant committing more fully to resisting the quantification of both teaching and learning. Although the experience was faceless and distanced, it was also personalized and dependent on connection.

### **Putting It into Practice**

I had determined to create a space for learning that didn't rely on traditional grades, that instead required student engagement, intrinsic motivation, and connection between students and each other and between students and myself. But I was still teaching asynchronously online, without the face-to-face techniques I was accustomed to using to engage, motivate, and connect. Without face-to-face meetings, points to collect, penalties for absences, or grades to (supposedly) motivate, how would I accomplish this?

I began by embracing facelessness. Many colleagues and friends have relied heavily on video when teaching online (some teaching synchronously using Zoom and others teaching asynchronously and making videos for students). I made a couple of videos for the beginning of the semester to show my face and walk students through some of the technology, but otherwise the course was text-based. I chose to use Discord, a free messaging and sharing platform, as our primary online course space rather than the university's LMS. On Discord, each class is set up as an invite-only server, and within each server I could create categories with channels for discussion (see fig. 1). Each channel is a titled thread that can be easily referred to in other channels to create connections between discussions. Students can add commentary to any channel, respond directly to others' comments, mention each other, insert images or GIFs, and share files (as long as the files aren't too big). I taught students how to use Discord (some were already familiar with it, hav-

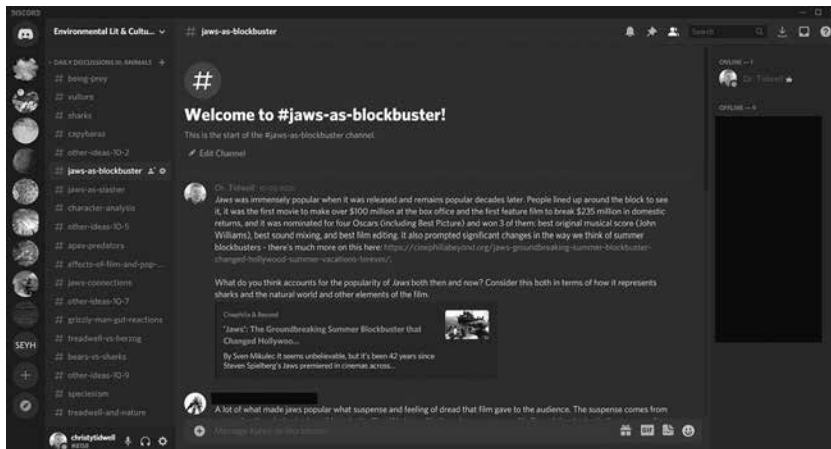


Figure 1. On Discord, the list of named channels is on the left, with one selected in the middle.<sup>3</sup>

ing used it for gaming) and conducted the vast majority of the class there, using the official LMS only for storing shared files (syllabus, assignments, readings) and for maintaining an official front door to the course (which was required by the university).

Moving to Discord required not only a rejection of the LMS but critical thought about the values underlying Discord as a class location. As Antero Garcia and T. Philip Nichols (2021) argue, platforms are not simply “discrete tools” but “digital worlds unto themselves (distinct ‘ecologies,’ as we like to call them). Each one is its own environment, a place where teachers, students, administrators, corporate vendors, and other people interact.” Discord’s ecology is quite different from that of the LMS. Discord is flexible, allowing me (and potentially students) to quickly and easily create categories and channels for discussion throughout the semester; it is friendly, allowing for the use of GIFs and reactions to show engagement even when you don’t have a long or in-depth comment to make; it is free, in both cost and philosophy (no Turnitin here, no administrative monitoring). Garcia and Nichols suggest asking, “*What values, biases, and assumptions are at work in the design of this platform? And how do these align with or diverge from my own goals for teaching and learning?*” More than the LMS, Discord assumes that users are able to engage on equal footing and that they don’t need to be surveilled.

Beyond the choice of technology, I took several actions to create connections in the class, center students, and emphasize learning rather than grading. Siân Bayne and colleagues (2020: 15) write, “Technology changes

teaching, and using technology well in the classroom means we have to rethink the definition of the classroom, and of teaching, itself,” and I spent months thinking about the shape of this Discord classroom and what my presence in that classroom could be like. First, I put discussion and interaction front and center, in ways that students did not expect from an asynchronous online course. We began each course with a brief discussion on Discord about what we can gain from online discussion and what students have liked or disliked about it in other contexts, and then I asked them to work together to establish some expectations for discussion. What does it mean, for them, to be actively participating in online discussion? We did wind up establishing this through listing a number of posts as a general expectation, but I did not treat this as a basis for points. Instead, it was a beginning. I kept a spreadsheet for myself, to see patterns, and if a student stopped participating or dropped off a bit, I reached out to them to ask if they were okay and to encourage them. In many cases, they were just having a rough week, appreciated the contact, and got back into the discussion afterward; in some cases, they had decided that they weren’t going to participate much (which is their right); and in other cases, they were overwhelmed by Discord, and I tried to help them work through any confusion they had so that they could participate more fully.

Discord’s structure emphasizes discussion and interaction, too, and almost all class work in all my classes took place on Discord. For discussion, I created multiple channels related to each class day’s content, and students were expected (based on the guidelines they helped create) to participate in at least a couple of those channels. I explicitly built channel topics not only out of my own ideas but also out of quotes and questions they shared, giving credit to students for their good questions both to acknowledge their intellectual work and to make it apparent how they were shaping the course. We also conducted peer review and shared final projects on Discord. Each student (or team) was assigned a specific channel where they could share their work, and then their classmates could review it and provide feedback. This approach worked well to provide a space for peer review and feedback while being more friendly than an LMS and more open than in-person peer review. Having those channels posted all semester also gave students a space to store their feedback and an easy way to see their growth as the semester progressed.

Just as in face-to-face classes, some classes were friendlier and more engaged than others. In the best cases, Discord allowed students to speak directly to anyone else in the class about the course topics and about their work and encouraged a kind of informality and pleasure that felt more like a good in-person conversation. In the worst cases, students did the work

and nothing more, but this structure still allowed them to explore ideas and improve their skills. (I can't force them to enjoy it, ultimately.)

Second, I regularly interacted with students both collectively and individually. Since I could no longer make my presence felt simply by showing up and standing in front of the class to talk, this took some conscious effort. I participated in discussions alongside students, asking initial questions but then also engaging with their responses, asking for clarification, or complimenting good ideas. I made a point of waiting until everyone had had a chance to participate if they wanted to (the time this took varied by class, since the students in each class had different schedules) and then jumping in. I also reached out regularly to individuals and met with students a lot. This is something that translates well from in-person, where I also meet regularly with students, but it is even more important in this context. Even though these meetings were not in person and often not even via video, they created a connection between us as people. I did my best to, as Sean Michael Morris (2020) writes, “teach *through* the screen, not *to* the screen. Find out where your students are, and make your classroom there, in a multiplicity of places.” If students have engaged with me one-on-one, they are more likely to ask for the help they need, put in the effort to meet my expectations, and succeed.

This interaction with students takes a lot of time and work, however. Even as I highlight the pedagogical value of this approach and emphasize that it worked well for me, this reality is important to acknowledge. But there are some ways to make this time commitment more manageable and sustainable. For instance, I used a standard email draft to reach out to students at particular points in the semester, which sped up the process of sending separate emails. An email sent directly from me—even if the language was much the same for each student (although it was personalized when the situation varied)—was more likely to prompt a response than a general email to everyone. I also worked very hard in the first few weeks to get them into patterns of responding to each other, so that they could then continue with a bit less of my presence during discussion into the middle of the semester. Doing so had dual benefits of helping me manage my time and giving them more ownership over the class discussion. I also planned group meetings where appropriate (some classes had team projects) to save on meeting time, and even when I met with all students individually, those meetings were student-led and required no prep time from me.<sup>4</sup> One very practical element of this setup, too, was that I was able to save time during the day to spend with my kids and then participate in discussion and even hold meetings in the evening after the kids went to bed. This made a huge difference in my quality of life

during this year, and the flexibility of scheduling at otherwise unusual times also worked well for many of my students. Some of them also had children to care for or full-time jobs to work, so they appreciated that I was available outside a typical workday's hours.

Finally, I trusted students, thinking of Stommel's (2016) well-known four-word pedagogy: "start by trusting students." This was a deliberate, ongoing choice. In the absence of reading faces and body language and without plagiarism checkers or other technologies of surveillance, I really had no choice but to trust them. It helped to actively embrace trust as an ethos, though. Catherine Denial (2019) describes what she calls "a pedagogy of kindness," which, she says, "distills down to two simple things: believing people, and believing *in* people." Doing this in my classes removed a lot of unnecessary stress and complexity from managing students. It made my classes more enjoyable, and it made it easier to engage with students as people rather than as potential cheaters trying to take advantage of me.

### **Concerns—Actually, Benefits**

With all this in mind, I still had to work through my own feelings about this approach. Would I be good at it? Going entirely asynchronous required some soul-searching. As Stommel (2021) writes about ungrading, "we can't simply take away grades without re-examining all of our pedagogical approaches, and this work looks different for each teacher, in each context, and with each group of students." Similarly, Morris (2021) writes, "For each one of us not only will the *how* of ungrading look and feel different, but the work we do *to get to* ungrading will be highly personal and individual." When I first moved away from traditional grading, I had to grapple with my own concerns about students giving themselves the "wrong" grades, about rigor, about relinquishing control. When I moved to asynchronous teaching, I had to do similar work, reevaluating, for instance, my reliance on facial expressions, body language, physicality.

I'm not alone in this anxiety. Amy Hasinoff (2018) writes, "I found it even harder to trust students in my online courses, where I usually can't read tone or body language, and there's little opportunity for the casual interactions before or after class that help build a relationship over time." Interestingly, however, I found it easier to trust students online. After all, I couldn't see personal choices that reflected politics I disagree with (e.g., voting for certain people), choices that do risk influencing my responses to students. I missed out on some details that help create connection, but I also avoided others that made connection harder.



Despite my decision to trust students, I still worried about the possibility of cheating and plagiarism, largely because everyone else kept talking about it. This was a major issue in pedagogy discussions across my campus, and reports of academic dishonesty rose significantly when classes moved online. Ultimately, however, I did not have this problem. My courses are discussion- and project-oriented with a lot of student choice and little repetition from semester to semester, which always cuts down on academic dishonesty. But the combination of contract grading and an asynchronous class structure also helped, giving my students more flexibility and therefore the ability to make better choices in order to complete the assigned work.

And explicitly moving away from technologies of surveillance showed that I trusted students and allowed them to take risks. As Bayne and colleagues (2020: 182) write, “In higher education settings, a culture of surveillance, facilitated and intensified by technology, risks creating conditions that are highly risk averse and destructive of the trust basis on which academic and student autonomy and agency rely.” Turnitin is the most obvious and familiar surveillance technology, but LMS technologies more generally also provide instructors with information like who has read (or at least opened) certain files and when students last checked in, while Discord does no such thing. I could see when students were online (unless they chose to set an invisible or offline status), but whether they were checking in regularly was reflected only in their participation. I understand the desire for this information because it can be useful as a way to help determine whether students are passively engaging with content or just ignoring the course altogether, but the loss of that information is outweighed by the freedom and trust provided to students by not tracking them in this way. And this trust in students paid off. It did not result in higher rates of academic dishonesty, and it made room for students’ humanity.

### **Looking to the Future**

At this point, I have been back in the face-to-face classroom for a year, and I do enjoy meeting with students in person and returning to that familiar space, the energy it gives. I also observe, however, that even after so many instructors have had experience teaching online, there seems to be a presumption that online teaching and learning has to look a certain way. Or there is a value judgment: it’s not as good or meaningful as in-person teaching. These attitudes are held by administrators, faculty who have not taught online (or who have had negative experiences doing so), and students themselves. But my experience argues otherwise.

My year of online teaching has been transformative for me. I no longer assume that the delivery mode of a class is what determines its value (although I do have my own personal preferences). And I have a much wider range as a teacher now. I have no intention of leaving the techniques I developed in my online courses behind, even as I am returning to the face-to-face classroom. There are real benefits to asynchronous and faceless online discussion, and I am currently incorporating those into in-person classes.

For instance, I continue to use Discord as a part of my face-to-face classes. Students share work there (with me and with each other), maintaining the benefits of it described above for collective effort and informal connections. I also provide spaces for students to participate on Discord even during our face-to-face classes, which offers alternatives for those students who have ideas to share but aren't comfortable speaking up in front of the class or who need more time to think. I also use it to accommodate students who must isolate or quarantine because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic or who simply get sick, have their cars break down, or face any number of other issues that make coming to class in person occasionally difficult; I wear a microphone and set up an audio channel within the server so that anyone in the class can listen to class live. This does not replace coming to class, but it helps students avoid falling behind when they must miss a meeting or even a few meetings. I have had multiple students thank me for this over the last year back on campus, students who are trying their best to keep up with the class despite external pressures. COVID or no COVID, the lessons I've learned from my year of teaching asynchronously have helped me make my classes more accessible to all students.

Especially used alongside ungrading, these techniques help me resist the standardization and homogenization of teaching and learning. They help me give my students the best courses possible—flexible, both safe and challenging, both meaningful and memorable. Stommel and Martha Burtis (2021) write, “We have to move away from learning objectives, course templates, and technological infrastructures, and instead build community. We need to center people in this work.” I agree wholeheartedly, and my online asynchronous courses have helped me think more deeply about the relationship between technology and community and about how to center people—even when they are not visible to me.

## Notes

1. I still am. Administrative pressures to offer courses in any particular format concern me, primarily because that pressure seems to reflect a focus on money rather than on teaching well.
2. I ask students to focus on completing the work and revising certain parts of it rather than on the grade each assignment is worth. At the end of the semester, they complete a self-evaluation (bolstered by a mid-semester self-evaluation, multiple conversations with me about their progress or what they want to work on, and a checklist of assignments) and assign themselves a grade.
3. I have blacked out any student names, but otherwise, this is a typical Discord server.
4. I also discovered, after accidentally double-booking myself for chat meetings in the first semester, that I could save time by having some overlap between meetings of this type. I could easily switch back and forth between chat conversations with a couple of students, and—because most students type much more slowly than I do—I had plenty of time to think during those conversations while I waited for their next messages to come through. I am not necessarily arguing for deliberately planning this, but I was able to extend meetings that I otherwise would have had to cut short while also being on time to begin the next meeting, and I do not think my conversations with any of the students involved suffered. This reflects my chat habits with friends, too. It is typical to have multiple conversations going on at once, and there is no assumption that multitasking in this way diminishes one conversation. My personal experience with these practices certainly made this pedagogical approach more effective and manageable.

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