



Core Books and Post-Pandemic Pedagogy

A Community Approach

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It is no wonder that faculty members have felt isolated (Dettmar 2021), disconnected (Carter Andrews, Richmond, and Marciano 2021), and burned out (Flaherty 2020; Zahneis 2020) since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020 we had to shift—seemingly overnight—our pedagogical modality and materials to teach online, from our homes, asynchronously or synchronously. In response to COVID-19, our urban commuter public college, New York City College of Technology (City Tech) of the City University of New York (CUNY), moved entirely online. We lost not only the community of the on-site classroom but also the gathering spaces of our English department and college that fostered collegial interactions. In the so-called post-pandemic¹ moment, faculty members continue to be isolated from their professional communities. Even for those teaching in person, a reluctance to spend time in indoor public spaces has meant only limited opportunities for co-located community to compare teaching stories and share advice. As we argue below, faculty members benefit from a community to learn from and with, to further develop pedagogical approaches—never more than in the post-pandemic moment of navigating the new and changing teaching situations, methods, modalities, and constraints.

The post-pandemic moment has exacerbated the pressures faculty members face, especially for those who are contingent and otherwise marginalized (Mickey, Clark, and Misra 2020; Zahneis 2020), yet these are not

new problems. Teaching is isolating work in general, as we create, deliver, and assess curriculum independently with little guidance or collaboration, and it is often deprioritized to focus on the other overwhelming demands of the profession. Work done to evaluate faculty satisfaction pre-tenure points to the problems of isolation, a lack of collaboration, and the need to prioritize research over teaching (Trower 2012). Faculty at all stages of their careers express the feeling that faculty community is an important—and often missing—part of their professional life (Cox 2004: 18). And contingent faculty are even more isolated, as they often work multiple jobs at different institutions and are excluded from department and curriculum committee meetings (Putman and Kriner 2017: 62). At City Tech, there are ongoing efforts to build and support faculty community around pedagogy and engagement, particularly with an eye toward bridging the contingent/full-time divide. One such project in the English Department centers on building community for full-time and contingent faculty in the First-Year Writing (FYW) course sequence through engagement with shared humanities core texts and common experiences; participating faculty work together to learn and create a curriculum that challenges students through relevant and diverse materials and offers them entry points into larger conversations both in their coursework and in their lives beyond the college.

In what follows, we discuss how this project, Core Books at CUNY, is a meaningful approach for navigating the new landscape English departments face as the result of COVID-19. The focus on community building that was central to the project before the start of the pandemic offers resiliency in the post-pandemic moment. In the face of increased isolation and uncertainty, we have found success in creating community through shared curriculum and a faculty cohort. As the curriculum integrates core texts and the issues they bring into the courses, it also fosters collaboration across initiatives with related community-building goals. The faculty cohort, invested in adopting and implementing the curriculum, builds and supports community in this period of ongoing instability and isolation. This community alleviates some of the pressures and burdens of the constantly shifting teaching environments and modalities while prioritizing impactful, accessible learning experiences. Our efforts to create community in the English Department at City Tech can benefit other departments adapting to the post-pandemic landscape.

Faculty Community through Curriculum

Core Books at CUNY provides faculty a much-needed community to support curriculum development and implementation; this need was evident

before and continues through to this post-pandemic moment. The project includes four CUNY colleges in an initiative inspired by Columbia University's core curriculum and funded by the Teagle Foundation to integrate a selection of literary, philosophical, or historical texts into general education courses to give students access to a humanities-based curriculum. The project directors saw curriculum as a way to create both a "community of practice" and a "community of learners" (Fabrizio and Marks 2020: 44). To that end, they argue that "a unified composition curriculum grounded in ongoing humanistic questions about life, purpose, freedom, and love, would create community among students and faculty, promote student engagement, and improve reading and writing skills" (41). In this article, our focus is on faculty community specifically, which has been the touchstone for the project's successful development through this post-pandemic moment. The project offers faculty who choose to participate the opportunity for collaboration at different levels: project-wide professional development, a small curriculum-development committee, and a larger English faculty community that grows through implementing, evaluating, and refining the curriculum, synchronously and asynchronously. Throughout, faculty have come together in an inclusive, sustained, and supportive pedagogical community to learn about the core texts as well as to work together to develop curricula and teaching materials that situate students and faculty as co-collaborators in making these core texts meaningful.

At City Tech, participants came together as a community to consider how to bring core texts to our college and to draw from the knowledge and experience shared in project-wide professional development to address questions at issue for English departments like ours: How do we integrate humanities at a college focused on professional and technical programs? How do we fit the Core Books approach in FYW? How do we make this a diverse and inclusive curriculum? How do we share our materials to increase access to expand the community of practice and community of learners? Exploring these questions together led to collaborative curriculum development, facilitating the kind of "pedagogical community . . . [that] allows us to develop self-conscious practices" (Bauer et al. 2008: 192). This collaborative curriculum building has helped the cohort feel less isolated and more supported while meeting English Department and college goals: integrating the humanities throughout students' coursework regardless of major, aligning with FYW curriculum and doing so with materials that represent authors and artists from a range of backgrounds and experiences that reflect our college's diversity, and finding options that employ open digital pedagogy. Address-

ing these goals involved breaking silos and connecting Core Books and its focus on the humanities to other community-focused projects such as the department's new FYW curriculum, the college's diversity initiative, and the Open Educational Resources and Model Course Initiatives on the OpenLab.² Building these connections has expanded the project's post-pandemic reach and, in turn, its community.

Humanities

To make these humanities core texts motivate a community-building endeavor at City Tech required careful curriculum development. Our English department largely focuses on general education at the associate and baccalaureate levels, within an institution that focuses on professional and technical degrees. Even if professional and technical students do not enroll in college seeking out the humanities, Core Books is founded on the idea that “students in programs focused on specific job skills such as computer programming, engineering, or nursing need—and deserve—to have their minds stretched by the big questions raised by history, science, philosophy, and the arts” (Delbanco 2012: xv). Participating in dialogues prompted by these humanities readings “fosters self-awareness, ethics, decision-making skills, good judgment, clarification of values, and the ability to know when and how to appropriately apply newly acquired skills beyond the classroom” (Katopodis and Davidson 2019) while also offering students the opportunity “irrespective of their career ambitions . . . to try being members of the academic community at their university” (Bauer et al. 2008: 191). It is difficult to provide City Tech students these experiences, as their majors do not allow the space for a first-year seminar or core course sequences like the Columbia University model. To have a wide-reaching impact, FYW, the only courses required of all students, became a natural place for Core Books.

First-Year Writing

In the spirit of community, the Core Books curriculum committee found ways to align its work with FYW to better support curricular consistency and, in doing so, to amplify the pedagogical choices of both initiatives. As Core Books was developing, the department had begun to integrate a new FYW curriculum that aimed to provide a consistent, rhetoric-based curriculum. Following the new rhetoric-based FYW curriculum, Core Books positions the core text readings as models, examples, or samples (Carillo 2015). It was essential to excerpt the core texts to allow enough time to engage with them and with the content of the FYW curriculum, such as focusing on the

rhetorical moves used in each text or modeling specific genres and discourse communities. The Core Books curriculum committee developed materials that include classroom activities; informal, creative, and formal writing assignments; as well as larger scaffolded assignments that integrate the goals of the FYW curriculum. These materials bring the two initiatives into conversation, joining faculty in a growing community of practice.

Diverse Curriculum

Core Books could not claim community as its focus with a curriculum that excludes. Faculty in Core Books at our Hispanic and Minority Serving Institution are invested in reading these enduring texts with our students as “an open and unsettled debate,” so as not to ignore the problems of canonicity and the ways that these texts “reflect a history of violence and exclude the already marginalized” (Montas 2017: B11). The community sees as its mission to work within college-wide efforts to develop curricula that are diverse and inclusive.³ To model this belief, we chose core texts by marginalized authors when possible, and paired them with current diverse voices. For example, the curriculum pairs a recent translation of Sophocles’s *Antigone* (2020) with Theater of War’s production, *Antigone in Ferguson* (Doerries 2016), a dramatic reading of Sophocles’s *Antigone* that relocates the play to modern-day Ferguson, Missouri, in the wake of Michael Brown’s murder by police. It also pairs the dedicatory letter from Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) with Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s (2020) speech that has come to be known as “I am Someone’s Daughter.” Although the work of creating truly diverse and inclusive curriculum is long and complex, this approach to core texts begins to connect the Core Books community of practice with this important effort.

Open Educational Resources (OER) on the OpenLab

The Core Books curriculum committee valued aligning with the OER initiative and the OpenLab, as further investments in shared community goals that have in turn supported the faculty community growing from Core Books. We chose readings that are openly available and made the newly designed scaffolded assignments created around those readings openly licensed.⁴ OER have many benefits for our college community, including making materials available for free and immediately from the start of the semester (Brandle et al. 2019: 87) and keeping them available beyond the semester as part of students’ lifelong learning. More broadly, sharing materials openly is beneficial in that they can be “collaboratively adapted and remixed by a global commu-

nity, resulting in new OER that are more culturally relevant and inclusive for different communities of learners” (Van Allen and Katz 2020: 214). Significantly, faculty community can develop through building OER and participating in related professional development (amaral 2018: 63). Openly sharing OER materials on the OpenLab makes the curriculum more visible, as it “make spaces for joint inquiry among all members of the college community in the spirit of Freirean ideals of critical pedagogy” (Rosen and Smale 2015). These resources support a faculty community interested in teaching the core texts during and long after the life of the Core Books initiative.

Model Courses on the OpenLab

Core Books’ alignment with FYW, the OpenLab, and OER positioned the project well to deal with the uncertainty of teaching in this post-pandemic moment. As the college sought ways to create meaningful remote learning options for fall 2020 that supported students, it also needed to address the steep learning curve that faculty faced in providing effective, accessible online learning environments. Further, the college needed to support adjunct faculty who are not paid for course development or redesign. The OpenLab, under the guidance of the Office of the Provost, piloted the Model Course Initiative to support faculty in creating and sharing fully formed, fully functional, ready-to-use, well-thought-out online OER courses that implement best practices for online instruction. The Core Books initiative transformed its library of teaching materials into model courses, which are more structured, comprehensive, and easily shareable. By following a few short instructions, adopters can clone a model course to create their own course site; because the materials are openly licensed, instructors can then teach the materials exactly as they were created, adapt them, or use them on a different platform for teaching. By using the model courses, instructors are at a minimum asynchronously connected with colleagues in the Core Books community. Core Books model courses support the needs of its sustained community, addressing the isolation of remote teaching while also providing the agility necessary for post-pandemic teaching.

Faculty Community through Cohorts

Grounded in collaborative curriculum and professional development, Core Books at CUNY has fostered community for faculty participants. It has shown the value in collaboratively developed, open digital pedagogy and curriculum: it provides support and community on multiple levels, is flexible and adaptable for new situations—pandemic or otherwise—and is therefore

a way forward and a model for English departments. Before the start of the pandemic, project-wide events and curriculum-committee meetings offered faculty the unique experiences of coming together to think about humanities pedagogy and create innovative curriculum. These team-building, community-focused opportunities began to create a Core Books cohort. Though initially the start of the pandemic threatened to make these kinds of events and community building impossible, the Core Books community continued to grow after and beyond the shift online through the rollout of model courses and professional development cohorts that met via video conferencing. Initially, we anticipated the difficulty of remote recruitment because we were not on campus and would not have chance conversations to spread the word about the program. However, we have found that the ease of using the curriculum via model courses and of joining synchronous online meetings makes the community more accessible, inclusive, and unifying, thus increasing participation in the program.

Core Books brings full-time and contingent faculty participants together to support each other in creating meaningful teaching experiences. Overall, twenty-two faculty members have participated in Core Books by using the curriculum, fifteen of whom also participated in professional development, faculty meetings, and events.⁵ The range of participants' positions made for a more representative faculty community that brought multiple perspectives and English Department subfields into the community-engaged work. Of the twenty-two faculty members, thirteen are adjunct lecturers and nine are full-time from all positions available to full-time faculty.⁶

It is essential to include all faculty in professional- and curricular-development opportunities—and to pay contingent faculty for their participation. At our college, the contingent faculty population is more than two and a half times that of full-time faculty (New York City College of Technology 2022). Because this is a community-focused project, we worked to avoid replicating the divide between full-time and contingent faculty and erroneously assuming only contingent or junior faculty require professional development. Despite the even more challenging and alienating realities of post-pandemic teaching, contingent faculty participants have reported the program has given them an opportunity to feel more like part of the department. Additionally, the communally developed and shared materials have the added benefit of lightening the otherwise unpaid burden of course preparation, especially as contingent faculty make up a large yet often invisible part of FYW faculty, of English departments, and of colleges overall.

In professional development meetings, participants shared resources

and learned new techniques for teaching the core texts while also supporting each other and reflecting on the experience of post-pandemic teaching with this curriculum, especially given the various course modalities participants were learning to implement. Faculty who participate in learning communities report finding “value in the sharing of resources and activities,” including learning new ways of teaching, and feeling encouraged to try new pedagogical approaches, methods, and activities—which are especially beneficial when time is limited (Elliott et al. 2017: 10). These communities encourage iterative approaches and value experimentation while requiring a relatively low time commitment. Core Books participants similarly reported in reflections that they liked hearing from each other about what was working, learning tools and techniques from each other, and having a group where they could share their ideas. They felt the model courses helped them teach their courses at this transitional, difficult post-pandemic time. Ultimately, the group wanted more opportunities for sharing, even volunteering for more meetings and seeking to expand the program by adding to the core texts, developing new materials, and linking to other college-wide initiatives.

The cohort meetings also led to a more informal community that continues to develop among faculty members. Participants offer each other support, reaching out to a wider network of colleagues to share ideas and concerns about teaching, knowing that they are working on a similar time line with the same materials—an asynchronous benefit that grew from the synchronous sessions. Further, an asynchronous community grew through the OpenLab and the model courses that allowed instructors to visit the asynchronous content of colleagues’ courses to adapt into their own materials. By working openly, instructors welcome all to see their courses in action and learn about their approaches, scheduling, techniques, and other uses of the OpenLab platform and other digital tools. This openness fosters an asynchronous community that can develop in synchronous spaces while also making the support of the Core Books program available to those who cannot or do not participate in the professional development cohort.

Participants in the Core Books community—ourselves included—experienced the energizing effects of working together on new approaches and new texts, of feeling supported while teaching in a difficult time, and gaining confidence in teaching online with materials created and vetted by a group of colleagues. This network of colleagues, in growing the project and connecting it to other initiatives at the college, continues to prove invaluable as we build the post-pandemic English Department together rather than in isolation.

Looking Forward

In response to the pandemic and the new environment that has emerged post-pandemic, there is more faculty interest in digital support and community building. This interest is evidenced within our own department in calls for more shared resources, more opportunities to broadcast the ways we used the shared resources, more virtual options for community events, and greater expansion of model courses. As Core Books is communally driven, participants have been able to bring their different interests, experiences, expertise, and connections to the group. Rather than taking a top-down approach, Core Books encourages participants to bring ideas for and take ownership of events to shape the project and to inform further iterative development of the curriculum in the model courses. Participants are moving the project in new directions: for example, a partnership with First Year Learning Communities (FYLC) to bring the high-impact practice of “common intellectual experiences” (Kuh 2008) to students through a Core Books shared reading; plans for college-wide and project-wide events that consider why and how core texts matter; and an expansion of the curriculum outside the Columbia core curriculum to incorporate the participant-selected new core text, Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), into a model course.

Moving into the future, we envision using Core Books to extend beyond faculty community to develop other kinds of community that the project is designed to foster: student community and faculty-student community. We are eager to welcome colleagues and students to our Core Books site on the OpenLab,⁷ which includes links to the model courses, the Core Books readings, and the University-wide Core Books site, and has the potential to add more interactive and community-building features. The site can transform from a space where faculty share resources with each other to one that includes students as well. Faculty and students can share ideas about the reading materials across sections and across semesters via social annotation tools to “foster active and voluntary collaboration, where students ask one another thoughtful questions and contribute outside knowledge and ideas” (Traester, Kervina, and Brathwaite 2021: 346). Further, students can contribute reflections about the readings and assignments and offer future students advice based on their experiences reading the core texts. In this vision of the post-pandemic English Department, an online community group of faculty and students can benefit from crowdsourcing and knowledge sharing as it broadens from one course to many courses in the Core Books project. The Core Books open curriculum has only begun to meet its potential as it expands the project’s community.

Conclusions

In the face of unpredictability, teaching needs to be more agile and accessible. The post-pandemic moment has been and continues to be a time of change that requires enhanced support for faculty at all ranks and levels of experience, support that will continue to be necessary as English departments continue to adapt. The community that has developed through Core Books at CUNY represents a rich range of experiences and perspectives. We see the type of inclusive, sustained, and supported pedagogical community around Core Books and its collaboratively developed shared curriculum as essential for navigating the post-pandemic moment. We already know that we are not returning to the same environments we left behind in March 2020. We see the future of English as opening up to greater hybrid or fully online modalities for all aspects of the profession to foster community with greater openness, agility, access, and communication. We see this developing community as a path forward for the ongoing shifts in higher education because of COVID-19, and the start of an enduring and necessary approach that will be useful for more productive, supported pedagogy in the post-pandemic future.

Notes

We are grateful for the Teagle Foundation grant that funds Core Books at CUNY and for the many colleagues who make the community we write about thrive.

1. We use the term *post-pandemic* throughout to mean post-the-start-of-the-pandemic because the COVID-19 situation is not over, and there still needs to be agility with modalities based on uncertainty in the face of public health concerns.
2. The OpenLab is City Tech's bespoke open online platform for teaching, learning, and community building (Edwards et al. 2014). It brings students, faculty, and staff together as it enables connection and collaboration and provides open spaces for the college's Open Educational Resources (OER) initiative (City Tech OpenLab n.d.).
3. The Diversity and Inclusion in the Curriculum and Education (DICE) subcommittee of the College Council Curriculum Committee leads these efforts. See City Tech OpenLab 2020.
4. This work, as with all work on the OpenLab at City Tech, uses the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 license (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0).
5. There may be others using the curriculum whom we cannot account for because there is only a mechanism for tracking courses that are cloned from the model courses.
6. The nine full-time faculty member positions include two full professors, five associate professors (two of whom started the project as assistant), one assistant professor, and one lecturer.
7. <https://openlab.citytech.cuny.edu/CoreBooksAtCUNY/>.

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