

TEACHING WRITING ONLINE: THE WAY THINGS REALLY ARE

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When the 2020 pandemic first struck, I was busy writing a philosophy chapter for my PhD. In that chapter, I grappled with arguably the most consequential debate in the social sciences and humanities right now: Whether knowledge of the social world—the way things really are—can be approached through the application of reason, or whether it can only be understood subjectively, as told in the narratives of its inhabitants; their lived experiences, in other words. According to this ideology, the social world is only what we make of it according to whatever story we tell. For example, in any classroom—online or otherwise—there may always be a series of complementary, contrasting and even conflicting narratives—that may very well be irreconcilable. On the above, Foucault (1988) famously argued “All my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence” (p. 11). Upon which Rorty (1989) would later clarify:

The difficulty faced by a philosopher who, like myself, is sympathetic to this suggestion [e.g., Foucault’s]—one who thinks of himself as auxiliary to the poet rather than to the physicist—is to avoid hinting that this suggestion gets something right, that my sort of philosophy corresponds to the way things really are. For this talk of correspondence brings back just the idea my sort of philosopher wants to get rid of, the idea that the world or the self has an intrinsic nature. (p. 7-8)

Drawing on my experiences—my narrative—of teaching academic writing online during the first semester of the 2020-2021 Japanese academic year, I will describe the anguish I felt for believing that the aims of my online lessons were utterly irreconcilable with the reality that my students' were facing. I will then show why I became skeptical of this narrative I had woven for myself; how, contrary to what Foucault (1988) and Rorty (1989) argue is possible, I discovered an external reality—the way things really are—that was the opposite of my pessimism. I explain how I came to that conclusion and what it means for me.

At the best of times, I find academic writing extremely difficult to teach; perhaps because it is one of the most difficult skills, I think, my students have to learn. There are two key reasons for this. Firstly, most Japanese students have little or no exposure to the process of writing essays in English at high school (Mulvey, 2016). In my experience then, as a consequence of having little, if any, experience of writing essays, few, if any, students are good at it. As a consequence of not being good at writing essays, few, if any, students claim to like academic writing; many students have told me that the class is widely considered the least popular of all the compulsory courses. Similarly, many teachers have told me that academic writing is their least favourite course to teach.

A second reason teaching academic writing is difficult is because of its focus, which is to teach students how to structure an essay in their first semester and how to assemble a much lengthier research paper in their second. The focus on structure in teaching—in place of meaningful content, for example—has the tendency to make classes a little dry; meaning that more energy and innovation is required to make them feel interesting and worthwhile; to breathe life into them, in other words. As a consequence of the above two factors then, teaching academic writing well has been by far my greatest professional challenge at this institution; little did I know it was about to get even more challenging.

At the start of the 2020 spring semester the pandemic began, the world went into panic, economies locked down and universities across Japan went online. Teaching online was now the new normal, but, to me, it felt like riding a motorcycle at full speed down a narrow, winding and mountainous road whilst blindfolded; I had no idea what I was doing and was terrified of the consequences of my inevitable mistakes. But how would I even know if I made any? All the usual social cues were either extremely difficult or impossible to read. For example, when teaching in a physical classroom, I constantly survey the room, checking for comprehension and reading the mood, if I sense students do not understand me, I can shift the explanation onto another, perhaps clearer example; if the students seem bored, I can make a joke in order to lift the atmosphere. However, everything changed at the beginning of this semester. My senses were gone, I felt like I was teaching into an empty void, worse, with students' cameras often off, I could not really be sure if anyone was staring back at me. I panicked, as I felt my heart beating faster at the surge of adrenaline in my system, I knew my voice was speeding up, I knew students would struggle to understand me, I tried my best to slow down. I desperately tried to make things simple, I wrote down everything in clear instructions on Google Classroom so as to ensure that even those with spotty internet connections could manage to get some semblance of content. Particularly for academic writing—with all its precise focus on essay structure—I was, in spite of my best efforts, bordering on certain, that few, if any, of my students would grasp the content of my lessons.

This negativity I describe above meant that each class left me drained, each class also gave me nausea, each class made me feel like I was back at square one: I was terrible at my job. More than anything, this last part haunted me. Despite my best efforts, I was letting the students down, I did not have it in me to do better; try as I might. This was the reality I had woven for myself; my narrative about teaching online, in other words.

Scheduling one on one sessions for the asynchronous part of the academic writing course—asynchronous for most students most of the time but synchronous for me, as I made my way through the class—I determined that I could go over students' essays and teach them what they had inevitably gotten wrong as a consequence of my lack of online teaching skills; giving students feedback in real time, would, in my view be superior to writing it. Having procrastinated somewhat, because I was so sure their work would be so substandard, I had forgone looking at it before I spoke to them in person. With a sinking feeling in my chest then—sure in the knowledge that what I was about to discover would be grim and not knowing

how I would correct it—I opened up the Zoom client and started my first meeting with my first student.

Their essay was wonderful, somehow—unbelievably—they had managed to understand and replicate all of the key points I had explained online; but, look, there is always going to be one or two who get it, right? Well, the second was number two, the third number three, the fourth number four and so on until around seven or eight, even when students had failed to write anything at all, a sternly-worded email corrected that and their essays, too, showed that they had understood exactly what I had tried to explain in class. This stood in stark—but welcome—contravention to the narrative I had created for myself. I discovered that the punishment I had put myself through did not match the reality unfolding before me. The students had, by far, exceeded my expectations of what I thought they were capable. Suddenly, I felt the blood return to my veins, everything was going to be okay! Just like that, the clouds parted, I began to enjoy my job once more and, because of this, the whole world around me changed profoundly for the better. My narrative now corresponded to the reality made knowable by what the students showed me they could produce; the way things really are.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this piece, I propose that the following is worth considering: if you find yourself in a position wherein you have woven yourself a negative narrative concerning your lack of abilities as a teacher, challenge that narrative; things—the way things really are—are not always nearly as bad as they might seem. In my case, discovering what my students were able to accomplish, in spite of the extra difficulties they faced, makes me doubt whether Foucault (1988) and Rorty (1989) were correct in their observations about the world and our place in it, at least insofar as how it pertains to classroom practice online. There is an external reality and it is better than I imagined it could be.

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