

Office of Faculty Development and Teaching Excellence

January 2016 Spotlight

Dr. Emma Humphries

Questions:

- Briefly describe your favorite real-world activities (missions)
 - My favorite missions are the ones that are outside of the students' comfort zones—activities such as attending a local government meeting or hearing, volunteering for a campaign phone bank, or actively participating in a protest or rally. I also like the mission to visit an elected official. This obviously takes some advance planning in terms of scheduling, preparing questions, dressing professional, and the like, which is a good experience on its own. The students always report getting a lot out of these meetings and there's always a fun photo-op!
- What are the challenges with managing these activities—such as the volume of hand grading?
 - The missions are pretty easy to manage considering that students must arrange to complete them on their own. Once a mission has been completed, the student must then prove it by submitting pictures and other artifacts on Canvas in addition to a reflection. Usually, I am just so jazzed they did something as cool as volunteering in a campaign or visiting an elected official that I forget I am engaging in the dreaded act of grading student work. Looking at their pictures and reading what they wrote is incredibly rewarding. I won't pretend to have 200 students enrolled, which would obviously make the task more burdensome. At this point, with my limited enrollment, I selfishly grade the missions myself, but if the volume were higher, they would be perfect for peer review!
- Do you have strategies to remind the students to do their "missions?"
 - Yes! Technically, missions do not have a due date; students have all semester to complete them. But I give them non-binding due dates anyways because if there's one thing I know about Canvas, it's that students rely upon its "To do" list on the right-hand side of the screen. For this reason, I assign due dates to missions that are intentionally spread across the semester. Also, I embed some "make it a mission" ideas in their module assignments. This gives students the option to do the assignment as it is presented, or they can sort of "level up" and make it a mission as well. Lastly, if I ever see an event or opportunity that would count as a mission, I send an announcement to students.
- You teach this course face-to-face (or hybrid) as well as online, how do the two compare? (Is this correct?) Do you get different things from the students with the different delivery methods?
 - Sort of. *Rethinking Citizenship* is entirely online. Then, with my rock star friend in Honors, Melissa Johnson, we created a hybrid, summer experience course called *Summer in the City* that draws upon some of the activities and principles of *Rethinking Citizenship*. Ultimately, there are two completely different courses.
 - That said, the hybrid experience is always going to be a little richer. It's just the way it is. I'm a huge supporter of online courses and will defend to the death the richness of experiences we can foster in online environments, but meeting with folks face-to-face

just gives it a little something more...if done right! So what do I mean by “done right”? Online is online and face-to-face is face-to-face. Trying to replicate a face-to-face experience in an online environment is ill advised, as is the reverse. Instead of looking at an activity and determining how I might replicate it a different environment, I look at the objective and then try to visualize the best activity for achieving that objective in the environment. I suppose that is why *Rethinking Citizenship* and *Summer in the City* feel like such different courses despite their similar goals and objectives.

- As for the students, I don't think I get different work from them in the two different delivery methods, but I do get different levels of engagement. In fact, I think the engagement is deeper in the online course. It is difficult to give a concise explanation, but suffice it to say that, in an online course, I get close to 100% participation. That is never the case in a face-to-face course.
- How do the students respond to the very short (typically under 5 minutes) video presentations
 - The other day, someone sent me a 45-minute video about an issue I really care about. My response, “You don't expect me to watch the whole thing, do you?” Later that same day, I found myself watching a 4-minute video about a movie I have little interest in seeing. So I think we can all agree we prefer shorter videos and the same is true for our students. In fact, I have had students tell me they look forward to my Weekly Constitutional videos!
- What are the challenges involved with putting together such short video presentations?
 - I find it to be easier! Especially when it comes time to filming them. Filming is exhausting. If I spend two hours in a studio, I'm done for the day. Seriously. I just go home—even it's before noon. To be fair, scripting the shorter videos can be tough. Few academics list brevity as one of their strengths and I am no different (as my responses to all of these questions illustrate).
 - I find that spending a few moments to think about the crux of your presentation—what you really want students to learn—is helpful when setting out to write or outline a presentation that is short and impactful. Once I started doing this, my videos got shorter and better.
- What is the student reaction to the real-world activities?
 - I imagine they let out some pretty epic groans when they first read about them. Judging by the questions I receive *before* they complete the missions, I'm certain they are not thrilled about them. However, judging by the reflections I read *after* they complete their missions, they always find the experiences to be meaningful and oftentimes fun. In fact, most students declare at some point in their reflection, “I'm going to do this again!” That's a win.
- Have you observed any changes in student behavior or engagement due to the real-world activities?
 - This is a great question that gets to the heart of the matter. Unfortunately, it's the most difficult one to answer. Empirically, I have no idea. I just haven't been able to commit the professional bandwidth to measure the impact of these strategies. Intuitively and anecdotally, I know the real-world activities work. I know because when students write their end-of-course essays, they call upon these real-world activities to make sense of their conceptions of citizenship. I know because students visit me after the course has

ended to tell me how inspired they were by it and to explore additional opportunities to engage in civic and political life. I know because even though they first approach the missions with trepidation, they report in their end-of-course survey and faculty evaluation that the missions were their favorite part of the course.

- Have you developed strategies to get students to engage with each other in the online Canvas discussions?
 - I have attempted to foster high-quality online discussion through three different models: whole-class, instructor facilitated; small group, student TA-facilitated; and small group, rotating peer leader. I have found the last approach to be most effective. It also helps that I communicate with the peer leader before their assigned module and expect them to do some advance preparation.
 - I also participate myself. I know there are some differing perspectives on this, but for me, posing questions and then never checking back in to an online discussion forum is akin to an instructor walking into a lecture hall, writing a few questions on the board, and then leaving the room never to return. Who does that?
- Do you have strategies for face-to-face discussions?
 - For face-to-face discussions, I try to mix it up and employ protocols when appropriate. A great list of protocols can be found here: <http://www.nsrffharmony.org/free-resources/protocols/a-z>
 - My best advice is to stop winging class discussions. Put some thought into them—what is the purpose of this discussion? What is the best way to engage *all* students in a meaningful way? In my experience, throwing out a few questions and expecting rich discussion emerge on its own is a pipe dream.