

**Documenting Communities During a Pandemic: An Exercise in Creativity & Rapport-
Building**
Queenie Sukhadia

In Spring 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit New York City, I was teaching “Introduction to Writing about Literature” at Hunter College, CUNY. This course’s explicit goals were to help students develop facility in both close reading literary texts spanning the genres of fiction, poetry and drama and to also apply those close reading skills to write well-researched, strongly argued papers about those texts. A diagnostic essay I administered to my students early in the course showed me that only a handful of them were interested in engaging with literature, even fewer in the formal study of it. Most saw literary texts as leisure objects to be passively consumed in one’s free time. One of my personal goals as an instructor became to shift this perspective. I wanted to help my students see literature as a living, breathing entity entangled with worldly issues—one that not only animates and theorizes social, cultural, and political issues, but also produces material effects in the world (violent or recuperative) based on how it is engaged. The ‘Documenting Communities’ assignment (attached as an ‘Appendix’) that I created was geared to meet this objective.

The Bare Bones of the Assignment

As part of the Documenting Communities assignment, I asked my students to create a video documenting how a community of their choosing (real or virtual) uses literature to heal from violence or promote justice, as per the themes of the course, and then write a group reflection on the following: their experience creating the video, what they learned about the relevance of literature in the world outside the classroom and its impact on our everyday sociopolitical lives; and the features of the literature the community uses that make it particularly suitable for the purpose of healing from violence or promoting justice (figurative qualities, language, form, diction, and so on).

Initially, my students and I discussed three possible techniques for gathering material for their videos, which they would hybridize based on their purpose and what they were finding at different stages in the process: intermingling with and interviewing people from the community, documenting spaces (real/virtual) and artifacts associated with the community, and trawling archives and scholarly journals to research their topic in further depth and contextualize their findings. The COVID-19 crisis made most of these in-person interactions untenable. Below, I offer reflections—both mine and theirs—on

the creative innovations they made to complete this project in the middle of the pandemic, while also offering insight into some of the other group activities we undertook in the classroom that can be exported to Zoom format, in order to build rapport among students.

Building In-Group Rapport

As an instructor, I'm aware that my students have a number of commitments on their plates at all given times. As a result, they often tend to push assignments off till the last minute, working on them the night before they're due. Due to the level of collaboration needed to successfully complete this project, however, I knew that this last-minute approach was unfeasible. I wanted my students to be thinking about this assignment and their community of choice as they moved through their everyday lives. To this end, I broke up the project in smaller chunks that they could work on regularly so as to have continuous contact with the project and with each other. I hoped that this would help my students develop a level of comfort with their groupmates, which I indeed did see happening.

As you can see in the assignment sheet (particularly the questions I lay out), fleshing out the scope of the project could be broken up into a series of sequenced steps. For example: determining which community the students would document, doing some preliminary research to determine what literature the community is using and whether they're using it for healing or justice-oriented ends, what role each group member will play in bringing this video to fruition (research, scriptwriting, video production, editing, and so on). All of these steps required regular discussion. To facilitate this, I would reserve 10-15 minutes at the end of each class session where the groups could get together and talk each step through. While we held most of these sessions in person, since the pandemic hadn't hit New York yet, these brief working sessions can as easily be set up on Zoom through the use of breakout rooms. I also established mini-deadlines (in collaboration with my students) where they reported the results of their discussions back to me. This ensured that they did indeed make progress toward accomplishing the assignment at hand while simultaneously establishing more productive working relationships with each other.

Adapting to Remote Workflows through Creative Play

As I mentioned earlier, this assignment was designed to be undertaken in person—through hands-on research, conversation and collaboration. However, the pandemic derailed our plans. Due to the restrictions on in-person work, I allowed my students to approach this assignment creatively, through

an ethos of play. Below, I outline some of the creative ways in which my students undertook this work, along with snippets of their own reflections on their processes.

1. A combination of self-expertise and well-established communication chains within the group:

The pandemic put a damper on serendipitous encounters and findings. My students no longer had the opportunity to wander and observe communities and their practices in the flesh. One of the student groups in the course used this time to self-reflect and identify intersections with communities they themselves belonged to. They then drew on their own knowledge of and relationships with these communities to see their project to fruition.

One of the students in the group notes:

“When COVID-19 struck New York City, we initially thought that we would be able to begin filming without issues at the time, [as] there were not a lot of cases. Once the disease had entered New York, we all agreed that campus was likely to remain open and one of us had even taken two midterms before campus closed. When quarantine started, we all panicked as we had yet to begin filming ... After reaffirming our desire to document the Muslim community, we got to work. Our researcher, as well as most of the group members, are also a part of the Muslim community. As our researcher has a level of knowledge on the Muslim community, she is able to provide our documentary with specific verses of religious scripture and moreover strengthen our source credibility as these Arabic verses are directly derived from the most significant primary source to this project; the Quran.”

Since the students had taken on specific roles, based on the mini group exercises we had been doing in class, they were also able to distribute responsibilities and communicate findings in a way that helped them see their project to completion. Another student writes:

“Our scriptwriter learned copious amounts of information from the researcher. Using the information gained, the scriptwriter was able to write an introduction for the video as well as write a basic script for the other group members to base their parts of the video on.”

2. Drawing on literature as a source of community knowledge:

Another group identified literary texts themselves as sources they could draw on to document their chosen community’s interactions with literature. A student from the group observes:

“While doing my research, I came across a book called The Groundmen which consisted of stories about physical abuse against women from five different perspectives. The author wrote an article following the publication of her book claiming that literature is one of the best ways to reach all different audiences and put things into perspective- women are not okay. This is the superior purpose literature serves in the community of women.”

3. Social media as a literary window into a community:

A third group decided to tap into social media as a platform for literary production that fan communities tend to use. Reflections from the students in the group include:

“As a researcher, I got to learn the impact many artists have [on] young adults. As well the role of social media, with the connection these young adults get with their favorite artists. Social media allows fans/ supporters to view a glimpse of the life of their favorite artists. Social media is a very big form of literature since it provides information all around the world. People connect with one another through different forms of social media. Social media allows many fans to come together and express their opinions. Even in sad times, as the death of artist it allows these fans to support one another with their favorite moments. The research allowed me to see many fan pages created in support for many artists. It’s not easy for young adults to deal with death but through social media they have one another. Overall, this project was a great experience in allowing me to view social media as a significant piece of literature.”

“I interpreted social media as a form of literature. In my opinion, social media should be considered a form of literature since it provides various types of information to people around the world. Literature intersects [with] our life because of social media. With the help of social media we are informed of anything that happens in the world. Various tweets from fans of these artists depict metaphors.”

“Before, people couldn’t take online sources or social media seriously, but now it’s the main source of information. Comments and posts created by fans that show their feelings include many examples of literary elements. It was fun and at the same time sad to research deaths and reactions of fans.”

4. Zoom interviews providing an avenue for virtual connection with the community:

One of the groups conducted Zoom interviews with members from their chosen community. While this not only allowed them to approximate face-to-face interactions, it also opened up a space for connection and healing in an unprecedented time. Students observed:

“I had a lot of fun undertaking this project. This was because especially we were in quarantine, I was roughly barely able to have any person-person contact. But because of this project, I was able to have a little escape and interact with others. It felt nice to hop onto a zoom call and chat with others for a bit. It was wonderful meeting new people and learning about their perspective because as we all know not everyone believes the same ideas or thinks the same.”

5. Craft-based creativity:

The group that conducted Zoom interviews with community members chose to represent the insights they gleaned through animated hand-drawn sketches. By choosing this tactile, artistic mode of presentation, the students fashioned an opportunity for themselves to bring their creativity to the fore.

All in all, while the onset of the pandemic and social distancing constraints definitely interrupted the original design of the project, it also allowed space for creativity and imaginative play to run amok. Coupled with the multiple opportunities present for encouraging rapport-building and collaboration between students, I would be hard-pressed to say that the disruptions COVID-19 created could only ever be interpreted negatively. Amidst immeasurable pain and grief, this pandemic also created space for thinking anew and innovating—practices I hope we take back with us when we return to ‘normal’.

Appendix: The Documenting Communities Assignment Sheet

Total points: 15 points (15% of final grade)

In this assignment, each group of students will document, through a video they create, how a community uses literature to either heal from violence or promote justice, as per the course theme).

I invite you to consider your project an open-ended manner. Be imaginative. Have fun with the project; really play with it! In saying this, I mean the following:

- Which community will you be documenting? The community can be an online community, a religious/ethnic/racial/socioeconomic/place-based/time-based community. The community might be one you may belong to. Play with the idea of community, but as you work through your ideas, be specific about why you are defining the group you are choosing to focus on as a ‘community’.
- What literature is the community using to cope with violence? Fiction? Drama? Poetry? I am open to thinking about literature that doesn’t neatly fit these categories, as long as you can

make a case for why the texts you are proposing count as ‘literary’ documents. Remember, genre is a fluid and artificial construction, and the texts the communities you are documenting may be using might problematize these genre divisions. It might be exciting to explore what the problematizing of genre even does for the effort to cope with violence.

- Think about violence imaginatively. Violence does not have to be physical violence. Violence can be psychological, emotional, social, legal, or even institutional. It can be the spread of narratives that inflict damage, for example.
- Think broadly about what the video you create and what the process of documentation involved in it can look like – Will you be interviewing community members? Will you be filming places and objects? Will your video involve the students in your group doing independent research about a topic, through databases and institutions such as museums, and then speaking about what they find?

As you think about this video, try to make sure it has a narrative arc. The following is an easy way to think of the narrative arc:

1. Setup: Introduces the situation, characters, and guides us to the main body and goal of the story.
2. Journey: Explores the meat of the story.
3. Resolution: The working out of the story, tying it all up.

Components of the project: Not submitting any of these components will lead to points being deducted from your assignment grade.

1. Project Proposal (5 points):

Your project proposal should address the following questions:

- a. Which community will you be documenting? Why is this group a community?
- b. What kind of literature do they use to cope with violence?
- c. Which angle are you exploring – healing from violence or the effort to promote justice? How are you defining violence?
- d. How are you doing the documentary work? What do you anticipate doing in your video?
- e. What is each group member’s role going to be in the creation of this video?

While (d) and (e) can change as you are going through the process, I want (a), (b) and (c) to be more or less solidified at this stage.

2. Documenting Communities video + Reflection (10 points):

- a. The 5-7 minute final video you have made over the course of the semester. Please make sure you mention at the beginning of the video that the interpretations of the video are your own (especially since they will later be made public-facing).
- b. A 2-3 page (double-spaced) group reflection that can engage any of the following points. Make sure every member's perspective is explicitly represented. The reflection can be as creative as you want it to be.
 - i. What was your experience like undertaking this project?
 - ii. What did you learn about the relevance of literature in the wider world outside the classroom and its social/political/legal significance? How does literature intersect with and inform our lives outside the classroom?
 - iii. Was any particular feature of the literature the community used particularly suited to the effort of coping with violence? Genre? Language? Metaphor?
- c. After playing the video for us, you will also deliver this reflection orally to your classmates.

Some things to pay heed to:

1. Please refrain from showcasing vulnerable populations in your videos – children, incarcerated individuals, persons with deteriorated mental health, and so on.
2. Please make sure that the individuals who feature in your videos sign the consent form I will upload on Blackboard. Before they sign the consent forms, you will need to verbally explain the form to them and make sure they understand what they are signing. Please also record (on your cellphone is fine) your discussion of the consent form with the individuals and their affirmation of understanding.
3. Please refrain from engaging in overtly risky behavior or interacting with persons where such an interaction could pose a risk to your physical or emotional wellbeing.

Other guidelines regarding video production/technology to be used:

- You can choose the tech you want to use for this project:
 - Check out filming equipment from the library or record the video on your cellphone!
 - Editing softwares are available on smartphones (eg. Photos), iMovie (for Macs), Moviemaker (for Windows) or on YouTube when you upload the video
 - For filming/editing advice or troubleshooting: you can find plenty of resources online/mine your networks for this. Ask 3 before you ask me!
- Upload the video on YouTube as an unlisted video, which will ensure that only the people you share the link with can find it – it will not be a searchable video.
- Then put the video link up on Padlet.