

Letting Go and Going All In: A Reflection on Liminality

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ABSTRACT: During the COVID-19 pandemic, institutional parameters shifted unexpectedly, which influenced how writing instructors took up and taught their courses. This article reflects on an instructor's experience teaching a corequisite support course during the pandemic, utilizing the concept of liminality, as basic writing scholarship draws on various metaphors that position basic writing courses "outside" the university. To reconsider how her course may have functioned for her students in different ways while face-to-face instruction was limited, the author positions her experiences designing the course and its placement measures alongside the unexpected, inconsistent conditions of teaching during crisis.

KEYWORDS: corequisite writing courses, COVID-19, course design, curricular design, first-year writing, liminality

Like many of you who are reading this, I teach first-year writing (FYW) and corequisite writing courses regularly. I suspect many of us agree that teaching feels different after the pandemic. We are still discovering the implications of the pandemic on our students, our institutions, and ourselves, despite that to me at least, quarantining and mandatory masking feels like a different lifetime. Whether these changes we feel will be permanent, time will tell. My colleagues and I are just beginning to look at the past with each other to commiserate with those who understand the mental and emotional labor of teaching alongside grief and austerity. In the moment I kept on, never articulating exactly what was happening in front of me. I don't think I knew how to. But now I can safely assume I'm on the other side of the pandemic and it feels less risky to investigate the past. In this space of recovery and reflection, there is much admission and thus, vulnerability.

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I teach at The University of Wisconsin La Crosse (UWL), a four-year comprehensive institution that enrolls about 10,300 students (9,400 undergrad); it is also a predominantly White institution (PWI). The average ACT score for incoming students is 24; the average GPA is 3.6 on a 4.0 scale; and 25% of these students graduate in the top 10% of their high school class. We have a single semester, three-credit standalone FYW course, Eng 110: College Writing, of which about forty sections are run each semester. Additionally, a small number of students (less than fifty) place into our graded, credit-bearing corequisite FYW course, Eng 100: College Writing Workshop, which is offered in the fall only. Students who take both Eng 100 and Eng 110 also enroll in FYS 100: First-Year Seminar (3 cr). And, so students enrolled in Eng 100 have a similar FYW experience as their peers, and they are enrolled randomly across all sections of Eng 110. To provide some additional context, Eng 100 is fairly new. It officially replaced Eng 050, a non-credit bearing, pass/fail prerequisite course in the fall of 2018. Eng 050 created unnecessary barriers for students, and we wished to remove them. To confidently make these changes, my colleagues and I researched corequisite models nationwide while considering our own local contexts and the needs of our student population. And not surprisingly, this was not my first serious foray into the metaphor of liminality at work in the university. There are many turns of phrase within scholarship about basic writing courses existing in liminal spaces, like “on the boundaries,” “in the margins,” or “on the borders.” I was familiar with this discipline’s metaphor already as I taught Eng 050, but it was helpful to consider exactly how it could be interpreted differently for a new corequisite course that also exists on the fringes of a university, albeit in different ways. For example, if this new space for Eng 100 is liminal, (but perhaps less liminal than Eng 050 because of its credit-bearing status) how can we continue to honor the knowledge students bring and the labor they do? Could centering the course around student knowledge create an equitable, tangible space as opposed to the transitory spaces driven by a deficit model I read so often about in scholarship?

Questions like these encouraged us to revise our placement measures to be more equitable, too. Historically, students were placed into Eng 050 based on a timed, online exam, the Wisconsin English Placement Test (WEPT). For some students, low WEPT scores are enough for direct placement into ENG 100. For others with midrange scores that neither affirm or deny the need for Eng 100, we require they complete a survey that gathers information on their writing habits, experiences, knowledge, and anxieties or perceptions via Likert-scale questions. The survey also asks them to read about the “Habits of

Mind” from the Council of Writing Program Administrator’s Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (such as persistence, creativity, etc.) and Allison Carr’s “Failure is Not an Option” from *Bad Ideas About Writing* and answer a prompt that considers how the two texts connect. Students have a month to peruse the survey and draft their responses. A team of three FYW instructors review the responses and many students do not need Eng 100, but it is clear about a quarter of the students do. The survey mimics a more authentic writing task seen in our Eng 110 courses. So then, we are more accurately and authentically able to see an incoming college writer at work.

As I reflect on this context provided here, I realize how intentional our choices were about Eng 100 and its role within our FYWP and the wider university. The goal of a corequisite FYW course is long-term retention and student success—a move from an introductory support course that only a few on the edges are privy to into a required, rigorous college curriculum. I see how much scholarly knowledge demonstrated itself as advocacy in this experience: we are very aware of the implications surrounding corequisite and basic writing placement, course design, and instruction as it is so often treated as less than and/or in transit (i.e., liminal): a short stopover on the way to more important knowledge. We cared deeply about these students as writers entering the University, about *how* they enter the University, and about the writing experiences they have during their very first semester.

But still, as the headlines became ominous, telling of an unknown and quickly spreading illness during winter of 2019/20, I had only taught Eng 100 and its new curriculum twice (Fall 2018 and 2019) to two small sections of students (15 each). During my first two iterations of Eng 100, I did notice one characteristic that Eng 100 and Eng 050 students shared was a lack of awareness and preparedness for academic literacies and higher-order concerns within their coursework. The Eng 100 course I designed in response was labor-based contract graded and included three key writing projects that centered around establishing their own agency and authority as student writers. I was well-read on the scholarship around corequisites (see all the context above) but a near novice in the coreq classroom. I was mostly theory, little practice, and still testing out this shaky curriculum I was on the verge of ditching. I made a rookie mistake over and over: a corequisite course is *not* a BW course, and it is *not* a FYW course; they’re all close cousins and do not confuse who is who or to assume to know e-x-a-c-t-l-y how they’re related.

It was clear to me how the Eng 100 work connected to the learning outcomes students were tackling in Eng 110. However, I vividly remember a student asking, “Is this class study hall?” I guess the connection—the

courses are cousins! Come on! —wasn't so clear after all. I was flailing in a newly created liminal space I *thought* I was handling. But not just yet, as this student had so helpfully declared. Sometimes students have a way of publicly declaring our shortcomings. In short, I was unprepared for two courses to co-exist in one liminal classroom.

Acknowledging Liminality

I've addressed how liminality can be literal and physical, a space utilized for transition to another space, like a set of stairs or an airport or an extra ungraded, required writing class before the "real" writing class. But it can also be a state of mind: a phase of life ends, another is set to begin, and we may feel unsure of what is next. Like when we start college. Or when we endure an unexpected pandemic that upends routine and has no firm end in sight. Or perhaps when both of these events happen at the same time! Either way, liminality has a sense of in-betweenness, one foot in, one foot out. There's a border, and we are in flux between a more tangible space or sense of permanence.

I have had enough time to discern exactly how teaching Eng 100 was an intensely difficult liminal experience, pandemic aside: it offered a glimpse *into* Eng 110 and unfolded *alongside* Eng 110 in ways that Eng 050 could not. Eng 050 was a standalone course with its own objectives that students had to meet *before* enrolling in Eng 110. I could easily assess whether a student was ready for Eng 110 when they were finished with Eng 050. There was a clear sequence between one course and the other, both with fixed definitions of student success. Although convenient for me, this firm boundary was disastrous for the Eng 050 students: P/F grades and credits that disappeared into a void. Eng 100 on the other hand, relies on Eng 110 context and coursework for students to succeed, neither of which is immediately nor specifically clear to me, the Eng 100 instructor, because my students come from a variety of Eng 110 sections. I'm familiar with programmatic goals, but not how those are taken up by individual Eng 110 instructors. And the boundaries of Eng 100, because it is centered around student interpretations of their experiences in Eng 110, are unpredictable.

Because of these fluid borders, I am everywhere and nowhere simultaneously when teaching Eng 100. I am everywhere, stretched into the roles of academic advisor, counselor, RA, tech support, consultant, mentor. Not to mention Writing Instructor teaching first-year students how to successfully adapt to their FYW course that I may know a lot or little about. My students

and I, by necessity, had to be forgiving with each other. We are working through writing in college as outsiders, figuring out a way into Eng 110 together. Context is in short supply, and I learned awfully quick to be flexible, curious, and compassionate. This multiplicity felt like working backstage in a theatre production in black head to toe, mic 'ed up and offering my Eng 100 students feedback and directions as they take on the *real* leading role in front of an authentic audience: like the corequisite support coursework wasn't the *real* work. Oh yeah. Each Eng 100 student is starring in a different performance at the same time, all semester long. Keep up!

Testing the Boundaries of Liminality

When Eng 100 was on my roster for Fall 2020, COVID-19 shifted our understanding of liminal spaces and challenged our traditional understanding of the university. For this metaphor of liminality to function clearly in our minds, there needs to be central ground, a control to which an object or idea can exist outside of the permanent. Eng 110 is this norm; the university is this norm. But by Fall 2020, the University itself had become liminal: it existed within an LMS, on Zoom calls, in emails, on PDFs, *so many Zoom calls*. The university's buildings, lights on and unlocked, were mostly empty, a stark contrast to a bustling campus of student orgs, extracurricular events, rec leagues, and study groups huddled around tables in the Union. Eng 110 (and other courses forced online) became a chaotic mash-up of recorded lectures and to-do checkboxes and Dropboxes and synchronous online group peer review and just. more. online. *stuff*. Similarly, some physical spaces once utilized for gathering and socializing, on campus and off—restaurants or theatres—became ground zero for viral contamination and sat empty. Other spaces that served a particular function took on new purposes as the virus changed how humans could physically interact, like gymnasiums turned testing centers or garages turned homeschool centers. Grocery stores and libraries, places where I once lingered, felt transitory because I limited my exposure by getting in and out as quickly as possible. Socially and culturally accepted norms and systems had broken down, and there were no rules for the new world in the meantime.

At UWL, online instruction was strongly encouraged, but not a requirement; aside from health concerns, classroom space to accommodate social distancing recommendations was nearly impossible to find. The online LMS components of all sections of Eng 110, once supplementary to face-to-face instruction, were now central ground as all sections moved online. How

could a corequisite assist a course that itself felt ephemeral, liminal? What could “support” even mean in this context?

I dared the unthinkable: could I flip the script and arrange my Eng 100 to be face-to-face? What if Eng 100 was the control in response to the newfound liminality of Eng 110? Just seven students were enrolled; all were on campus. I took a chance and listed my course as in person (something which may not be possible for individual instructors in many campuses), hoping that after a Labor Day weekend of unpacking, my students would show up healthy and we’d at least have a first day of class together. Fingers crossed for more.

As I reflect, a thought: *What was I thinking?!* This was the pre-vaccine era; I risked infection daily, bringing it home to my family with two young children. The students I was teaching lived in dorms, which are ripe conditions for COVID-19. And who is to say they were making safe choices to keep *me* and others safe? But that voice in my mind: wouldn’t these students benefit in so many ways from consistent face-to-face class? If I was healthy, shouldn’t I at least try to make it work? After all, my other three courses were online, as well as all my administrative work; this twice-a-week interaction was the little face-to-face contact I had with humans other than my immediate family. Back and forth, back and forth my inner dialogue ran and ran. This tug on my moral compass is a special breed of anxiety I do not miss. Today, a sense of shame for positioning work ahead of my family and my own health when I had the choice not to still lingers. But that’s for a different reflection.

Liminality, Backwards and Inside Out

Well, what did this Eng 100 as tangible space look like? It *looked* depressing and unforgiving: like an episode of “The Walking Dead,” minus the zombies. Allow me to paint the scene, about four weeks into the semester. The mood in the empty hallways was November evening, even though it was 9:30 am on a September Tuesday, let’s say. Our classroom: cavernous, sterile, meant for forty, but just seven students and I, spread out across long, rectangular tables fit for a lecture-style class. The prep to emerge: freshly scrubbed up to the elbows, a clean mask, a recent negative COVID-19 test. The prep to teach: two pre-packaged wipes from the sanitizing station to wipe down the keyboard, mouse, and front desk and table area. Our class meetings felt clandestine. I expected a man in a suit to burst through the door at any moment, count our masks, measure the feet between us, shout at us to disperse

immediately. This is what we worked against. But as soon as I say, “Let’s get started,” hands are in the air and the mood shifts:

“I don’t understand what my professor wants me to write.”

“I can’t find the instructions for my next essay anywhere. She said on Zoom yesterday she posted them online, but I can’t find them, and I am supposed to read them and think of a topic by Friday.”

“We’re supposed to write a discussion post about this piece we read but everyone has already said what I have to say, and it just sounds like I’m saying what everyone else said. But we lose points if we do that.”

On behalf of my students, questions like the above were an incredible display of vulnerability. This delicate foray into collaboration is the kind only vulnerability can bring. About four weeks into the semester, I cared a lot less about meeting particular criteria and more about interrogating the confusion outside of that classroom, and the students were also ready for this challenge. Too much was unpredictable: whether we’d continue with face-to-face class anyway; whether their Eng 110 instructors would fall ill and cancel weeks of class at a time; whether they or myself would be in quarantine; whether they’d need to take care of a family member, or much worse, whether tragedy struck, and they’d be absent to grieve the loss of a life. What was the use of an attendance policy? Or required conferences? Of expectations of consistent, stellar work? Of deadlines? I recall in Spring 2020, in the middle of an anxiety-fueled discussion (on Zoom of course) with FYW colleagues, someone piped up: “Look. We’re trying to stay alive. This is just a writing class.” Survival became the baseline, anything more was a perk. It felt cruel to expect more than the minimum from my students.

One shift in my own expectations meant I had to continue to sit uncomfortably with an imperfect model of Eng 100 while a worldwide pandemic upended any chance of “normal” instruction. I so desperately wanted to figure out how to perfect this corequisite and to just stop feeling like I didn’t know what I was doing. For Fall 2020, I needed to be realistic. This was not going to be the semester where I figured it out. And as I write now in 2023, two thoughts:

This was actually the semester in which I figured it out.

Hence this narrative.

But, if at the time I had a realistic acceptance of what was possible, then why did I insist on meeting in person?

I think at the moment, I just wanted to interact with students. That's really what I love about my job. The students. Maybe I wanted a bit of a routine and a space to make sense of so much murkiness and unstable ground that COVID-19 had wrought. Having a class—the prep, the focus, the high, the reflection—might make me feel a little more normal. I must have been searching for something from the before that could help me feel normal. All of us have something that we did that helped us cope, and this was one of mine.

Any progress we made that semester would be considered a win against the near insurmountable challenges that on any day could entirely derail a student's engagement in and commitment to the course. My mantra was: Just show up. Communicate with me honestly and often. We will figure out what we're doing each day. We will figure out grades and points as we go. I was especially thankful I had experience with contract grading, which is an assessment system well-suited for unpredictable situations, as flexibility is a natural feature. It was a trust exercise, live and in person. I had to let go, embrace the liminality. It was just a writing class.

But I still wanted to honor their time and knowledge. The first half of each class period, we focused on two or three students' concerns about Eng 110 and offered whole class feedback about those concerns (hence those hands in the air). The student who was sharing their Eng 110 work was responsible for providing the context, purpose, and audience for us, and we then took turns asking the presenting writer follow-up questions to assist them as they made sense of their particular writing task. Our conversations were about writing online discussion posts, reading assignment sheets, navigating the course LMS and figuring out what information is pertinent and what is supplemental, drafting an email to an instructor, providing feedback in an online peer review and interpreting feedback they received themselves.

I integrate peer review often in my FYW courses (who doesn't?), but I knew that model would be difficult given Eng 100's attention to individual student context in Eng 110. Despite these considerations, I value student-to-student feedback and wanted to center student expertise in Eng 100. This workshop model put a lot of attention on their work, so it was also risky. Much responsibility was on the students to prepare, discuss, and talk with each other like writers. Covid-19 had also raised the stakes and made day-to-day engagement in online coursework more confusing, difficult, and time-consuming. There was an avid *need* for a steady space to sort out the liminal collaboratively. This workshop model thrived because it was

consistent and reliable, a steadfast response to a course that felt ephemeral in its online presentation.

I focused on encouraging students to see connections between each other's writing assignments, the work they were doing in their own Eng 110 class, and the work we were doing in Eng 100. I resisted the habit of intervening and giving direct feedback to the students and instead attempted to question motivations for rhetorical choices to foster their own understanding. To solidify these connections between courses and different writing projects, after our discussion students wrote a reflective exit ticket (in an online document) that asked them to consider how the feedback they heard that day connected to their own Eng 110 work. If they were a featured writer, their exit ticket focused on summarizing, ranking, and interrogating the feedback they received. Then, we assigned who was up to be reviewed during the next class period by checking in on their current Eng 110 project.

The second half of our class period was spent making progress on our Eng 100 curriculum. For this aspect of class, I drafted either a short writing activity, discussion prompt, think-pair-share, or something similar based on the progress we made during the class prior. At times I had to modify this in the moment because of a revealing moment in workshop. Students worked alone, in pairs, or trios, depending on the task; if working alone, they paired up later to share and discuss their new ideas. Each student had a shared folder online (I also had access) where they kept their work (like their exit tickets, for example); if working in pairs or groups, they wrote while sharing a document to encourage collaborative writing despite an awkward socially distanced seating arrangement.

A caveat: *everything* we did in class was saved in shared, accessible and editable folders online so students who missed class could follow along; so I (and the students) could return to previous work as a repository of resources; and so we could see trends and themes as our writing unfolded. It was rewarding to see the files accumulate and to track physical progress as the semester unfolded. This was such a small detail, but it made a difference during a time when again, little felt consistently reliable.

While they worked, I quickly reviewed the exit tickets to note key patterns and find additional connections to the Eng 100 coursework. To wrap up class, we came together as a group to discuss challenges, questions, and concerns. Sometimes this meant looking directly at a student's draft in progress, other times, it meant I identified a particular gap in their knowledge and provided a model, did a thinkaloud, or pointed them to resources at our campus library. Again, flexibility was key as instruction depended on

themes in student inquiries. Feedback could be needed anywhere, so it felt like it was everywhere, all the time. We repeated this set up every class period, twice a week. For the most part, attendance was miraculously consistent, and together, each student did successfully complete Eng 100 and Eng 110.

2023: Epilogue, or Intentional Liminality

This small cohort and our experiences together gave me a sophisticated sense of how first-year writers interpret (and misinterpret) writing situations in their courses. The semester was also the most comprehensive view of our FYWPI had yet to encounter at the curricular and programmatic level. It was just a writing class, but wow, what a writing class it was. And just think, this reinterpretation of what liminal could be had happened a bit serendipitously. As much as COVID-19 took from away from us, it did give me an opportunity to be innovative with how I spent my time with my Eng 100 students. Had I not had this time, I suspect I'd have continued to forge ahead, eyes on the larger institutional goals of the course, never looking into the eyes of the students in front of me, nodding along as they unraveled yet another experience as a FYW student I was not privy to otherwise. Although I had many other students that semester enrolled in my courses online, the seven I had face-to-face I remember more vividly; at times, they felt like my only students. They received an enthusiastic, invested version of myself every class period—I was never burned out from teaching sections back-to-back and always eager to step away from a screen. Most importantly, I was facing the liminal alongside them as COVID-19 raged on. I did not have any answers for them. I was just as helpless.

Aside from my Eng 100 curriculum, what also stands out are the conversations in between, before, after, and around all the talk about writing. I had many conversations with that class I never had with students before and will likely never have again. It became clear we were coping together. Sometimes we talked about the irony of boredom alongside raging anxiety: the repetition and loneliness of three or four classes online, one after another while at the same time, illness lurking everywhere, ready to pounce. Sometimes we did some freewriting, or I read poetry out loud. *Try to Praise the Mutilated World* by Adam Zagajewski felt appropriate. For most of us, it was our only face-to-face interaction in a classroom that semester, and it was telling. Life outside of class was bleak, and, heck, sometimes class was bleak. Sometimes having class felt weird, like an exercise in existentialism as the world outside the walls was blurry and muted. Why talk about developing essay topic ideas

alongside news that the morgues are running out of room? Sometimes class was a celebration of little things: we watched a funny video online or shared what local places were offering great takeout options.

I remember during COVID-19's initial days, reading online about slow hobbies becoming trendy again, like baking bread and knitting and puzzles, all which require patience for a timely and sometimes unknown process. Perhaps my course needed something similar: time and space to work itself out, gently. That I was able to sit and witness the bread rise, so to speak... what an unforeseen circumstance. Had the rest of life been "normal," unaffected by COVID-19 and raging on at pace, I do not think our classroom would have unfolded as organically.

Today, my Eng 100 classroom has a similar dynamic: inquiry and un-
sureness are welcomed and encouraged. The course is still liminal institutionally—it exists only to support another required general education course. But it does not *feel* liminal teaching this course in the classroom anymore. The slipperiness of our knowledge making feels sure and expected. Nor is it a study hall; the course holds its own as an equal counterpart to its sister course, Eng 110. I am secure in my roles, whatever they may be on whichever day of class. I can trace this confidence back to where the shift out of the liminal began: Fall 2020. No, I suppose it was not a shift *out* of the liminal. It was a shift into *accepting* the liminal and learning to hold still, to let things be, within dynamic parameters. Sometimes we need to shift into what is plausible and more importantly, possible, within larger moments of austerity.

While drafting this piece, I wondered about those seven students and what their lives are like now. I used our campus software to search for their names. Their faces in tiny boxes on the screen didn't do much to honor the complexity of all I knew about their ambitions and fears, their growth and frustrations. But as I scrolled through the alphabetical list, I leaned in close to the screen in disbelief. Not a single student was still enrolled. All had withdrawn. I was shocked. They seemed so eager and invested in their own learning during class. Even more, they persisted through a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic while enrolled in college. If they could do that, what else can they do? But what happened? What was the thing, or the moment, that set off the thought, "I can't, or won't, do this anymore?" What was the thing that took precedence over their education?

The rest of the day, I told myself different narratives about the *why*. Or how this happened. It was probably financial concerns. Or maybe they lost momentum and college wasn't it for them. Or no, they probably found an opportunity in which they saw themselves succeeding somewhere else.

Letting Go and Going All In

Then I shifted to what they might remember from our time together. I still carry this experience, and these students, with me today. What do I hope they hold, if anything?

I hope that when they think of their time during Covid-19, they think of Eng 100 as a space of respite, where writing was used to make sense of the shifting world around them. That they knew their voices and writing mattered and at that moment in time, their questions and discussions together provided a much-needed sense of unwavering community and creativity when little else could. This is a high ask of a writing class, and it is true for me. Whether this is true for my students, I will never know. But I will say it anyway in an act of self-preservation.