Mid-Pandemic Pedagogy: A Candid Dialogue between Student and Literature Professor

Katherine Saunders Nash * and Emma Carlson

Department of English, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA 23284-2005, USA;
ailigrace73@gmail.com
* Correspondence: ksnash@vcu.edu

Abstract: In this article, an English professor and a sophomore-level English major explicate the singular difficulties of teaching and learning Virginia Woolf’s novel Mrs Dalloway mid-pandemic. These difficulties arise despite the fact that Mrs Dalloway would seem an ideal novel for our historical moment in the US. Woolf offers her readers searing insights into pandemic casualties, trauma, ruinous disillusionment with political systems, and radical isolation in a fragmented society. Working together, professor and student identify potent reasons why teaching and learning from this novel can be so difficult. We unpack a serious yet widely misunderstood gap between students’ and educators’ perspectives: a gap widened since 2020 by a combination of remote learning and social media consumption. We then recommend intellectual and pedagogical strategies that illuminate Woolf in ways not required before the pandemic, while also bridging perceptual gaps in the classroom between professors and students. Studying and interpreting Mrs Dalloway, a novel invested in illuminating myriad perspectives on PTSD, pandemic casualties, and political ruination, is difficult yet uniquely vital in this historical moment—though not for the reasons this professor expected.

Keywords: pedagogy; pandemic; narratology; rhetoric; novel; Virginia Woolf; internet

1. Introduction

Professor: Fall 2021 was, for our R1, urban university in the United States, the first semester in eighteen months in which face-to-face discussion courses were plausibly safe and functional. For our in-person, 300-level English course, Virginia Woolf’s 1925 novel Mrs Dalloway seemed to me an ideal choice. I knew many if not all students would struggle with their unique transitions back to a face-to-face classroom, and I anticipated that this novel would raise highly relevant topics for discussion and lecture. Reading the novel’s testament to the damage wrought by the 1918 influenza pandemic would enlighten our daily struggle with the COVID-19 pandemic. As a postwar novel, Mrs Dalloway illuminates several characters’ post-traumatic suffering, potentially relatable to students raw with anxiety over present-day, sharp political and ethical divisions playing out in news media and social media. Myriad characters’ internal impressions, brought alive through free indirect discourse and melded seamlessly with voiced dialogue in the novel, ideally would help guide students in renewing their interpersonal skills in the classroom after the isolation of remote learning. In Mrs Dalloway, according to my experience her most teachable novel, Woolf—one of modern history’s most eloquent witnesses to traumatic loss—would seem to be a timely and valuable addition to the syllabus.

However, my students reacted to the novel very differently than I had anticipated. I saw evidence of a significant disconnect between students and novel when a conscientious and intelligent student asked questions about Woolf that I had never heard in thirty years as a student, instructor, and then professor: How could we trust that Woolf had employed
sophisticated narrative art and not merely recorded her own experiences? Moreover, how could we know who the real Woolf was, and whether her insights into human experiences could be trusted? Such questions were so afield from any I had expected to hear, and yet voiced by a student unquestionably earnest and successful in his study. I had no doubt at the moment the questions must be rooted in some experiences he and I did not have in common. I noticed that the rest of the class seemed unsurprised by the questions as well as intrigued to learn how I would answer. Thus, while in the moment, I briefly reflected on possible reasons for his asking these questions, I also sensed that the gap between my expectations and his questions was potentially related to the major pedagogical challenge that I had anticipated deserved more prolonged consideration.

2. Rhetorical Reading and Understanding in a Mid-Pandemic Classroom

Professor: In spring 2021, I had devoted my educational leave grant to studying the massive pedagogical crisis that resulted when educators and students had to pivot to remote education in the U.S. on or about 8 March 2020. This transition naturally required some time, but the dominant pattern that emerged in higher education was that while faculty conducted lectures and attempted to prompt discussion via Zoom, millions of college students grew silent and turned off their cameras. To understand motivations for students’ silent invisibility in their online classrooms, I first read every publication I could find on pandemic pedagogy. Given the inevitable delay between pivot and publications about the pivot, I found only a few articles; these primarily acknowledged but did not fully interpret why and how online learning limited student engagement and achievement while damaging students’ mental health. For instance, eight higher educators’ perspectives, highlighted in a fall 2020 issue of the distinguished journal *Liberal Education*, illuminated systemic racism and freshly conspicuous inequities of access among students as dominant forces in the catastrophe students were experiencing. Six of the eight contributors to the article remarked primarily on those inequities, seeing educators’ opportunity to prompt civic engagement for social justice. Three offered specific examples of replacing traditional assignments and course learning objectives with hands-on community service opportunities upon which students would then be assigned to reflect constructively, and another offered examples of how to adjust policies to nurture students’ mental health and stability. One contributor summed up her vision: “Ultimately, [solving this educational crisis] may not be about helping students to reach instructors’ goals but rather enabling students to set and make substantive progress toward personal and educational goals that are meaningful to them. Ultimately, that’s what I think equity looks like in this moment”. (Aragoni et al. 2020)

I admire the intellectual and pedagogical ambition of these educators’ stances, and I agree that creative alternatives to classroom learning give students opportunities to walk away from their quiet black screens, learn experientially, help others, and practice intentional civic engagement. The long-overdue, prominent attention given anti-Black racism and grotesque inequities across the board accurately describes our centuries-old cultural status quo. This and other articles reinforced my deep dive into faculty development addressing anti-Black racism, the saturation of my teaching habits with strategies for inclusivity, and my acceptance of two grant opportunities for closer study of how diversity, equity, and inclusion should manifest in the liberal arts and medical school, respectively. I also read recent scholarship on teaching empathy in higher education (e.g., Sutton 2021). However, such worthy pursuits did not fully satisfy my original question; I sought insight into individual students’ minds. Why, precisely, were millions of students silent and invisible on Zoom screens?

To answer the motivations and assumptions behind my student’s questions about Woolf’s accomplishments in *Mrs Dalloway*, I sought and I am grateful for collaboration with one of the students from our class, Emma, co-author of this article. Emma informally
canvassed students, friends, and family in a thoughtful effort to consider the question from several angles. In the pages that follow, we unpack the reasoning behind salient dimensions of the questions our classmate raised: Is Mrs Dalloway sophisticated art or merely recorded information? How can we know the “real” Woolf, and can we trust her? In the course of planning and writing this article, Emma’s and my discussions eventually revealed rational and irrational reasons why our classmates shared substantial distrust of Woolf’s authority as an artist. We explored why students doubted her right to offer generalizable claims about human experiences. Emma and I deduced that if those claims were not rooted in the flesh-and-blood Woolf’s lived experiences, students worried she lacked the prerogative to write about such fraught subjects as trauma, politics, and sexual desire. In addition, our study of the novel’s fictionality, and its generic conventions as a modernist novel, yielded some insights for Emma and me into our classmates’ historically situated distrust of Woolf in fall 2021. In this article, we identify dimensions of remote learning and the consumption of social media as complicated causes for the students’ barriers to interpreting Woolf. We further argue that teaching and learning a skill called rhetorical reading has unprecedented interpretive value in mid-pandemic pedagogy and scholarship.

Rhetorical reading is a practice consistent with a rhetorical approach to narrative theory. I have found over two decades that it is extremely useful pedagogically, whether or not a professor teaches its underlying theory. As I have argued elsewhere, when an actual, flesh-and-blood reader reads a novel rhetorically, they decide to accept provisionally some normative assumptions on which the narrative depends. In other words, they join the authorial audience, those to whom the implied author is writing. For example, a rhetorical reading of George Orwell’s 1984 requires understanding totalitarianism by way of Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany as recent, painful examples, and provisionally accepting that 1984 is still at least a few years in the future. Both adults and children can join the authorial audience of the Harry Potter series by accepting such norms as the idea that magic is real and that souls not only exist but can act, speak, and even reason independently of an embodied mind. J. K. Rowling’s authorial audience must also agree that violence is sometimes an appropriate response to tyranny. Even if some flesh-and-blood readers are too young to recognize consciously that they are at least temporarily adopting the latter normative assumption, their acceptance of it helps them join the authorial audience (even as they retain a tacit understanding that these norms do not apply to their world). The question of whether or not joining an authorial audience has any effect on the behavior or long-term beliefs of real, flesh-and-blood readers has been addressed less often by rhetorical narrative theorists than by reader-response critics (e.g., Radway 1991) and theorists of narrative empathy (e.g., Keen 2010). As we argue later in this article, though, many students’ experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic have changed the ways they approach, or reject, joining authorial audiences; more broadly, those experiences have significantly changed the way students learn from texts.

A rhetorical approach posits that narrative is a form of purposive communication. This is not to say that each narrative has only one purpose or only one correct interpretation. But it is to say that some interpretations are more congruent than others with the implied author’s purposes. Members of an authorial audience can debate disparate readings productively since they are supported by the same foundation of textual evidence. Joining the authorial audience means confidence that the implied author crafted the narrative in this way instead of any other way, inviting their audiences to have layered cognitive, affective, and ethical experiences that depend in part on the implied author’s purposes. Distinguished narrative theorist James Phelan, who has contributed more than anyone to the integrity, sophistication, and utility of the rhetorical approach to narrative, defines narrative as Someone telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened (Phelan 2007). In short, a continuous feedback loop among implied author, authorial audience, and purposive design results in a narrative with determinate meanings.

Very early in Woolf’s novel, Clarissa Dalloway thinks to herself that “[h]er only gift was knowing people almost by instinct” (MD, p. 17). The authorial audience, which is just
beginning to form judgments of character, may accept her self-description as provisionally true until it is proven false. Many students not only believe it but, in taking it too seriously, consequently struggle or fail to join the authorial audience. Some of these may scorn her for being merely a socialite, a woman whose only remarkable quality lies in her relationship to others. However, scant pages before this passage, the implied author has provided a foundation for a rhetorical reading of Clarissa as a more profound, complicated person.

Clarissa relishes the present moment of every day, having managed somehow to survive both the 1918 influenza pandemic and England’s devastating role in World War I (MD, pp. 7–8). She cherishes the bond she imaginatively shares with her fellow survivors. Clarissa walks along a London street appreciating the vitality she finds in people’s facial expressions, commutes to work, commercial advertisements, the sound of airplanes droning overhead because these are “what she loved; life; London; this moment of June” (MD, p. 8). Because Woolf’s authorial audience understands how profoundly the pandemic and the War decimated England’s population and traumatized the survivors, even this early, it can recognize Clarissa’s reflection of her “only gift” as an underestimation of herself. Clarissa may doubt her own complexity, but Woolf’s decision to craft her novel in this way helps the audience recognize that as an instance of Clarissa’s self-doubt.

Teaching the novel before the COVID-19 pandemic, I noticed that my students’ interpretations of this passage exemplified one of the challenges students ordinarily faced in joining the authorial audience of Mrs Dalloway. They tended to miss or underestimate details such as the fact that the novel’s effect depends upon its being set just after World War I. If they overlooked such details, this was often due to their strenuous effort to acclimate to Woolf’s rigorous prose; moreover, many of them did not realize how much World War I and the ensuing pandemic decimated England’s population of young people. Accordingly, I read students the statistics of global and English casualties and injuries between 1914 and 1920 and I compared those numbers to England’s 1913 population; I also quoted tolls of recent epidemics and wars per capita. To illustrate the urgency of Woolf’s context, I impressed upon them that Lady Bruton’s emigration plan would rob an entire generation in England of its desperately few survivors. As I guided students to read rhetorically, I pointed out that Woolf chose to invent Lady Bruton’s emigration plan to underscore how much worse a bad situation can become, and we discussed why Woolf would choose not to explain to her audience how dangerous the emigration plan is. Like all other textual details, I reminded them regularly, Lady Bruton and her plan are not inevitable details; Woolf created them for some purpose. Moreover, she created them this particular way for a purpose: she eschewed authorial comment in part because she wrote for an audience that would deduce the danger and appreciate Woolf’s authorial restraint, particularly as a modernist writer, in not openly judging the plan’s value.

Daily life does feel perilous when a country’s leaders have proven themselves irresponsible and untrustworthy. Government leaders’ corrupt judgment in her recent past leads Clarissa to sense that “it was very, very dangerous to live even one day”, a line that resonated powerfully for rhetorical readers before 2020, but less for those who had not begun to join Woolf’s authorial audience (MD, p. 8). Rhetorical readers feel the looming potential for an influential, entitled citizen to provoke government leaders of a depleted, suffering population to make yet more decisions that would cause even more depletion and suffering. My contextual information about population numbers and casualties helped students join Woolf’s authorial audience, enter the feedback loop of implied author, authorial audience, and purpose, and consequently celebrate the courageous spirit of a rather ordinary woman planning a party for that evening, gratefully embracing life so soon after national and global catastrophe.

What, then, has changed for student readers since 2020, so that the process of teaching rhetorical reading in a classroom is palpably different? What would make a classroom full of bright and engaged students so ill-equipped to joining Woolf’s authorial audience in Mrs Dalloway? They were not only underprepared to do so, but they resisted joining that audience, suggesting—politely—their resistance even to provisional confidence in Woolf’s
wisdom. No matter how many questions I asked and how many hours I pondered, I could not discern what would lead an English major to question whether Woolf’s technique was sophisticated art, on the one hand, or a mere record of her personal experience through thinly veiled fictive characters, on the other.

Whatever has changed my students seems also to have affected students in other disciplines. In fall 2021, I heard from at least a dozen of my teaching colleagues from a variety of liberal arts departments that never before had they, as fervently as they did now, want to read their students’ minds. Many earnestly wanted to recognize their students’ viewpoints, to understand what caused student burnout, disengagement, disaffection, and an unprecedented amount of non-communication. What would cause students not to answer even direct appeals designed to help them succeed in the class? My colleagues were as baffled as I was in understanding how best to reach our students. Another large, different population of professors resolved their bafflement by pessimistically assuming that students had grown lazy during the three semesters in which all of their education came through a computer screen:

They don’t know how to learn anymore.
They don’t care.
They see college just as a ticket to a job.
They’ve become anti-intellectual like so many people in this country. 4

These attitudes, even more common than those of the empathic group, prompted some professors to increase rigor in the classroom, make policies more restrictive, and reduce options for students to communicate with them outside of class: they took a punitive approach to coerce students’ re-engagement. We all knew well, though perhaps abstractly, that the toll of isolation and remote learning during COVID-19 wreaked severe academic and social tolls on our students. While some of my colleagues approached that toll cynically, as an option that students had taken advantage of in order to skate through their education, other colleagues and I yearned to understand our students’ points of view on face-to-face learning in our college classrooms so that we could communicate with them intellectually, respectfully, and, for many of us, empathically.

Emma’s observations may give my vexed colleagues some valuable footholds in our new teaching challenge. Moreover, I recognize her several contributions to this article as opportunities to understand Woolf’s novel more fully, now that its real readers in my classrooms consist primarily of survivors.

Student: Walking into the first physical classroom in my entire college career so far was surprisingly invigorating. There were desks! Chairs even! Like Clarissa Dalloway running mundane errands, “What a lark! What a plunge” it was! (MD, p. 4). Yet, as I noticed the students filling them, the uneasiness set in. A room of corporeal students is a jarring contrast to a computer screen of black boxes. In online classes, I struggled to learn given the unclear classroom expectations and dramatic lack of accountability. There were no consequences for being physically or mentally absent, not speaking at all, or being on your phone for the entire class. Many of my professors were also unfamiliar with conducting online classes, and although I know they excelled in physical classrooms, few found ways to compel students’ engagement online. Few professors required students to have their cameras on, and it was difficult to feel like we were gathered together as a community. Simply being able to see the faces of my online classmates, or having the professor ask casual questions before instruction, goes a long way in such isolating times. In one of my online English classes, a professor commented on how his camera screen being the only one on made him feel like he was talking to himself in an empty room, but his joke was met with uncomfortable silence. I smiled at his remark, but he could not see it, as I was guilty of having my camera off as well. Oftentimes, when a majority of students turn off their cameras, the rest follow. Seeing oneself visible in a mosaic of black boxes, a student can feel
like a specimen under anonymous surveillance. The urge to also hide behind a blank screen is nearly irresistible.

This dynamic changed dramatically in the face-to-face classroom. Now, with dozens of masked faces looking around the room, there was no button to click to become invisible. If the professor addressed me by name, I could no longer ignore that appeal to my attention—as was possible for invisible Zoom scholars—because I was now being looked at directly. If I did not know the answer to a question, instead of just pretending I did not hear the question, I now had to reply. I was thoroughly intimidated, vulnerable even, and when discussing this with other students, it seemed that we were all relearning how to conduct ourselves in a traditional classroom. Professors apparently also struggled to readjust.

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed many aspects of daily life that used to feel commonplace. My high-school graduation was transformed into a drive-thru days before the ceremony, and everyone was acutely aware of what an unorthodox substitution it was. The pandemic has also changed how we communicate with each other. In the early months, meeting up with friends in person was not feasible, so online social interactions became another substitute for normalcy. Social media was one of the few ways to keep up with my friends and family, and I began using it more and more.

Online interactions dramatically differ from in-person interactions. The obvious difference is the timeliness of communicating—there is no reason to reply to a text or email right away, in real time, as you would if your friend asks you a question over coffee, or a professor inquires where your missing assignments are at the end of class. Had this professor inquired via email, the message could lack urgency when surrounded by a multitude of other emails in a student’s crowded inbox; it may be overlooked and would not receive the timely response expected by the sender. Also, it is highly possible to misinterpret someone’s tone, intent, or demeanor. Social media has changed the way we interact with each other, and thus the way we conduct ourselves and treat one another. These social media apps can be wonderful ways to connect—they can be playful and entertaining—but they can also be breeding grounds for hatred, violence, and ill intentions. When trying to reconcile the positive and negative aspects of these modern communication tools, it is easy to become overwhelmed and anxiety ridden.

3. Rhetorical Reading and Overstanding in the Mid-Pandemic Classroom

Professor: I began fall 2021 hopeful that I could offer students a positive experience in the classroom that would help reverse the negative consequences of remote learning. In small groups, I facilitate discussion easily, ardently; I lecture only as a concession to students’ requests. I taught in fall 2021 brimming with continuously renewed, rephrased questions and exhortations to encourage my students to engage confidently with me. I felt keenly aware of my students’ discomfort with my questions when they were direct appeals, yet I still offered those appeals—as sensitively as I could—in undiminished hope of changing a culture of reticence. Without knowing the roots of that culture, though, I had few measures of success: I collected anonymous student feedback three times in 15 weeks, and I estimated that, as the semester progressed, discussions grew more fluent, less stilted. Also, my distribution of grades matched the trends from my pre-pandemic classes, so I gauged that our communication was approximately as effective as usual. One glaring difference consisted in a handful of students disappearing from each of my courses, never to return, which was a new experience for me. A few others officially withdrew their registration, even when they had earned high grades up to that point.

These disappearances seemed to me both mysterious and worrisome, but they had the productive effect of recentering my attention on the nuances of my remaining students’ language and behavior. Although students’ anonymous evaluations at the end of term bore out the positive effects of my enthusiasm and encouragement, during the semester, I was slow to acknowledge that my ideal for students might be insufficient to make a sea
change in their attitudes. Striving for humility as an educator, I nonetheless also recognized hubris in my optimism. On a daily basis, I demonstrated openly my heartfelt, protective impulse to give my students a safe and enjoyable opportunity to learn as an intentional community. I wanted to include everyone; the greater diversity of students, the better. Further, I felt that immersion in great literature could be for my students a welcome respite from the vitriol in contemporary politics, a mental escape from the pandemic, a retreat from certain puerile discourses on social media. I devoted an unusual amount of class time to teaching interpersonal communication, mutually respectful cooperation, productive teamwork, and rhetorical reading skills. I found them amenable to all but the last; to rhetorical reading, they proved puzzlingly resistant. I had no reason at the time, though, to see that as connected in any way to their behavior in online coursework.

Was their reticence in online classes due to fear of conflict, particularly in light of our savagely polarized society? I was poised to eradicate any opportunities for students to disparage one another in our face-to-face community. (I also staged opportunities for friendly intellectual disagreements, emphasizing how constructive and healthy conflict can be when it is conducted with mutual respect.) Had their reticence online been due to anxiety, depression, or grief? I made myself conspicuously available to my students as a chaperone to the student counseling center or simply as an informal listener. For those whose behavior in remote learning had stemmed from insecurity over incomplete educational preparation earlier in the pandemic, I was openly ready, in person and in real time, to adjust the learning objectives to any level that would prove both accessible and challenging for the students.

I did not expect all of my students to share just one reason for taking part in widespread withdrawal from synchronous online learning, but I had one approach to reversing that withdrawal: offering my classroom as a safe community in which students learned through constructive discussion, friendly disagreement, and rhetorical reading. I knew that, by joining a discursive community with such a distinguished artist and intellectual as Virginia Woolf, my students would expand their understanding of the world. Guided properly to recognize the authorial values, joining the authorial audience, students would appreciate the (to my mind) profound difference between casual online chats and intricately honed narrative masterpieces. Building community has always been one of my primary goals in leading class discussion, but that semester, it took on outsize importance. But without recognizing ahead of time how powerfully entrenched my students’ pained anxiety was, I neglected to teach the skill of rhetorical reading in a way they could adopt confidently.

Student: I did not originally realize how bizarre it was to Dr. Nash that we, as a group of English majors, displayed a deep distrust and suspicion of Woolf’s authority. It was not until I had a brief conversation with my father about his experiences with reading that I realized a stark generational difference was at play. My father is a lover of gritty, imaginative war novels, and when I asked him how he could tolerate fictional recounts of established histories, he shrugged, not looking up from his book. He said many of the authors he reads are military veterans themselves, but regardless, he is always receptive to an author’s values. He gladly joined authorial audiences that wanted to experience historical events from an intimate perspective where I would not have made it past the third page of biased nonsense.

So, where do my father’s generation and mine differ in our receptibility to rhetorical reading? In reading Mrs. Dalloway for the first time, many of my classmates and I were thrown off guard by Woolf’s emphatic prose. I questioned her choice of free indirect discourse, and how Woolf asserted broad public opinions with such authority. Mrs. Dalloway’s subjects of a global pandemic, queer identities, and suicide could not be more relevant and personal today. However, whereas these topics would seem to draw younger generations closer to Woolf, they have the opposite effect of pulling us away.

The passage in Mrs. Dalloway where the reader first learns of Clarissa’s exciting, passionate relationship with Sally Seton occurred in our first reading assignment. I was just
beginning to get a feel for the novel, and I was shocked, to say the least, when I discovered this popular novel from 1925 contained, as it seemed to me, queer characters. This also raised a few eyebrows of my classmates. After the initial surprise came a familiar sense of suspicion. I, among many of my peers, am aware of the phenomenon occurring in modern media known as “queerbaiting”. Queerbaiting is a marketing technique where creators, whether it be TV show executives, celebrities, or virtually anyone online, will hint at or bait audiences, with queer identities without fully acknowledging them. Queerbaiting can also occur when creators incorporate queer characters into their narratives solely to entice queer watchers; oftentimes, these queer characters lack the same narrative development as their straight counterparts. In 2016, the hashtag #LGBTFansDeserveBetter went viral on Twitter after a popular lesbian character on a TV show was killed by a literal stray bullet moments after she experienced a queer kiss. Queerbaiting can also mean celebrities facing criticism for hinting at being queer, but never explicitly stating such outright. Queer people especially denounce the phenomenon as trivializing or exploiting LGBTQ+ culture. The actual presence of queerbaiting in some of these situations is precarious, often intrusive, and not necessarily justified; however, my mere understanding of this internet phenomenon made alarm bells go off in my head during the Sally Seton scene in Mrs. Dalloway.

I began to wonder why Woolf included this detail about Clarissa and Sally’s relationship. Did Woolf incorporate this in the novel for shock value? Was it added because lesbianism was (and still is) taboo? Was Woolf herself actually queer? My immediate distrust for Woolf’s queer credentials was shared among my classmates. A lot of us were put off by this detail, perhaps because we were aware of the controversy it can cause in the present day. I felt myself calling Woolf’s authorship into question, because I am accustomed to consistently being let down by modern day queer representation. Regardless, my awareness of cultural shortcomings such as queerbaiting would not exist without social media.

Queerbaiting in online media alludes to the very real presence of homophobia in modern society. I have a poignant memory of crying alone in my room after watching footage from the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting on my phone. I remember watching grainy, blurry videos taken from outside the club, of hunched over figures illuminated by blue police lights. This occurred in a country where gay marriage is legal. Consider the experiences of those in countries where it is not. Social media has allowed us to become acutely aware of social injustice, political corruption, and manipulated information online. News media companies are under intense scrutiny for exhibiting biases in their published articles, and with the polarizing “us vs. them” political climate in the United States, skepticism, suspicion, and dread are commonplace. It is both anxiety inducing and normalized.

When Woolf alludes to sensitive topics in Mrs. Dalloway that young people feel they have personally connected to through social media, it is difficult to accept her values without some guarantee on her authority. On social media, discourse runs rampant, and individuals freely voice their opinions back and forth. In novels, authors express their personal values from cover to cover, and it is difficult for young people to listen quietly without pushback. In an age of malicious misinformation online, we instinctively question a writer’s authority on a subject, especially sensitive or personal ones. The hesitancy to join Woolf’s authorial audience stems from my generation’s increased awareness and exposure to manipulation and misinformation saturating present day social media.

Professor: I had no idea at all that, for students to identify Woolf’s expectations for her implied author, any of them would want proof of the living, breathing author’s sexual orientation as license for her to describe two characters kissing. We spent seven class periods discussing Mrs Dalloway, during which I asked daily for interpretive questions, but I never detected that students suspected Woolf of being provocatively salacious, let alone homophobic. When a student asked in class whether Woolf had ever been sexually involved with women, I answered factually and thought no more of it. In teaching the skill of rhetorical reading, I do not insist that students permanently join the authorial audience,
nor that they cede all of their values and convictions to become someone else. I do ask, though, that they work hard to align their minds, at least temporarily and provisionally, with the audience for whom an author seems to have crafted a narrative. I knew what queerbaiting was, but I never guessed that the concept was interfering with students’ rhetorical readings. As an English professor trained to help students enter fictional engagements, I had certainly encountered students’ resistance to joining an authorial audience, but none had, to my knowledge, taken a vehemently defensive stance against it.

What I have recalled upon greater reflection and conference with fellow English professors is that my students were engaged in a practice identified in 1979 by Wayne C. Booth as overstanding (Booth 1979). Rhetorical reading consists of two dimensions: understanding and overstanding. Adopting enough of an implied author’s norms to join the authorial audience is termed understanding, but forming judgments about the value and/or validity of joining that narrative audience is overstanding. Pre-pandemic, my students and I had worked harder on understanding, not only because it is so essential to rhetorical reading but also because, in doing so, we implicitly recognized and judged understanding to be productive. If I had recognized in fall 2021 that my students were overstanding, and uneasily rejecting, Woolf’s authorial audience, I would have taught them this concept and we, as a class, would have evaluated the utility of rhetorically reading Woolf’s novel. We would have examined with care generic differences between, on the one hand, the kinds of self-disclosure with which they are bombarded through social media, and on the other, mediated fictional construct that is this particular novel by Woolf. To teach in that way, though, I required evidence that they were conflating two very different genres.

I know all too well that triggers to trauma can be devastatingly disorienting, but a pedagogical discussion with college-level rigor should give students the skills they need to regain their equilibrium in order to learn. Earlier in this essay, I mentioned working hard to establish a safe environment for classroom discussion. Our class was a genuinely safe, intentional community. And thus, I assert the problem was not their failure to disclose their questions nor my failure to invite them, but rather a colossal exhaustion shared by everyone, including myself. We all earnestly worked together, with the utmost mutual respect, to interpret novels and poetry. Our discouragement, distance, vulnerability, and fatigue hampered our collective intellectual endeavor. Emma’s forceful example of conflating obscene online media images with Woolf’s eloquent “match burning in a crocus” suggests that, as professors, we must recognize that students may be at a much, much greater distance from the texts we teach than we would imagine. Now equipped with some cognizance of overreading triggered directly by discourses of social media, I have a greater opportunity to teach rhetorical reading with both its dimensions, overstanding and understanding.

4. Anxiety, Access, and Connection in a Mid-Pandemic Classroom

Student: The surveillance aspect of remote learning triggered serious anxiety for many of us who felt pressured to look and act presentable on screen when we were feeling anything but while navigating college in a global pandemic. As online classes also prevented casual before or after class conversations and other means of connection, appearing on camera in a room of strangers made us feel stiff and vulnerable. Even in a closed online learning environment, classroom disconnect and pandemic anxiety strongly influenced our choices to stay muted, with cameras off.

The overabundance of information available on social media sits right next to you in the virtual classroom—be it on a cellphone or on a different tab on your computer screen—and it can induce serious anxiety and stress. A lot of information online is weighty, disturbing, and hateful. The negative posts often stand out more than the positive ones. Current global events are stressful in themselves, yet trying to keep up with all of them, or not, but regardless still seeing them saturate one’s ubiquitous social media feed, increases
the emotional burden. Not only do global news stories pop up, but they are accompanied by a dissonant mix of celebrity scandal, public tragedy, and the latest pictures from your high school friend’s beach weekend birthday bash. Every post is bound to myriad comments or reactions, many of which are nonsensical, inflammatory, and meant to provoke an emotional response in other users, especially over polarizing topics. Scrolling through Instagram on any given day can mean brief but haunting exposure to unprecedented wildfires, a mass shooting in your hometown, or any grave injustice occurring in what feels like every place of the world. Throw in what now feels like a meaningless celebrity squabble, and experience a tailspin of anxiety, anger, and frustration. The consumption of social media can produce an abundance of stress and wariness, whose cause and effect both prove distracting, resulting in desensitization and disengagement.

Navigating the abundance of disastrous information on social media can cause one to become conditioned and desensitized to global tragedy. A neat, one-hundred-word summary of a catastrophic global event is not uncommon in a social media post or even online news publication, and they often lack full explanation before hurrying you along to the next crisis at the end of the post. Having to shift from crisis to crisis and trying to stay informed on all of the global happenings can cause one to not only think less critically on topics, but also become overwhelmed and exhausted. When reading about perpetual social injustices online, it is increasingly tempting to despair that nothing can be done to change the situation, creating a sense of helplessness. It is difficult to find the balance between sitting uncomfortably with the presented information and disengaging with it completely.

In the early stages of the pandemic, where online learning was entirely unfamiliar, many of my peers and I raised questions about personal privacy in recorded Zoom lectures. I had heard stories of strangers “Zoom-bombing” into unsuspecting classes, often to disrupt instruction with vulgar chat comments or bizarre microphone noises. Many students were amused by these shenanigans, perhaps related to my generation’s parodic and nonsensical humor often used as a coping mechanism. Others, like me, questioned the security of these Zoom environments, especially as instructors leading class were equally unfamiliar with the modality. This uneasiness, however, has lessened since. All recorded lectures from all of my online classes omit video footage of participating students, and only show the camera view of the professor. Some are only recorded as audio files. However, one aspect of surveillance still remains through internet permanency.

My mother was the first person to warn me of the permanency of the internet, in hopes of preserving my character for distant, distant future employers. She is correct in knowing that once a piece of information is uploaded to the internet, it can be shared, reuploaded, and very difficult to remove. The permanency of the internet, understood more maliciously by younger generations, seeps into the online classroom. With virtual classes being recorded and available for students to watch at a later time, any student’s comments will exist long after they were said. Whether you express polarizing political opinions or an idea you explain is misconstrued by another student, it will remain on the internet. In a discussion-based online class, one can feel hesitant to speak freely on topics, especially polarizing ones, in fear their words will be used against them.

While internet permanency is a striking aspect to online learning that deserves consideration, I strongly believe the truer reason for students’ reticence and preference to remain invisible in online classes stems from the vulnerability of appearing on screen, coupled with the normalized option not to. Many of my friends claim the reason they remain off-camera during online classes is either because they feel unpresentable for class or because no one else has their camera on either. When appearing on-camera, one can feel like they are under constant scrutiny, especially by peers who luxuriously have their cameras off. Why would any student expose themselves to surveillance from their peers and the anxiety it brings when it has been made clear by professors that there is no consequence not to?

Many professors are understandably hesitant to force students to turn their cameras on in online classes, yet in the instances where my professors pushed for this, it was largely successful. I believe as long as professors keep communication open and encourage stu-
students to reach out with concerns, conducting online classes with a camera-on requirement most successfully recreates a traditional, in-person class. When there is no incentive to turn one’s camera on in class, many opt not to. Not having to get dressed, make oneself presentable in a way they prefer, or reveal the disarray of their bedroom is the obvious choice. Being on-camera can make one feel like they are under constant, invasive scrutiny, especially by anonymous peers who luxuriously have their cameras off. In online classes, students’ attention is not divided among the professor up front, the large whiteboards behind her, and the rising rows of seats in the lecture hall—everything to look at fits entirely on the computer screen in front of you. If your peers are paying attention, they will see you scratch your nose or take a sip of coffee. Not to mention, you will also be made acutely aware of what your Zoom appearance looks like, as it will abruptly pop up and fill your entire screen when you first enter the meeting, as well as be visible on your screen throughout the meeting. In online classes, students are more conscious of their physical appearances, creating pressure, anxiety, and vulnerability. If turning your camera on means having to deal with the complex emotions surrounding personal image and peer surveillance, the alternative is an obvious, if not relieving choice.

I would encourage professors of online classes to take extra measures to create connection between themselves and their students. Very rarely can I recall a professor asking, “How are you doing today?” to an online class, but in the times they have, the stifled responses are proof of students’ weariness and disconnect. Yet, one professor kept trying, asking us about our other classes, our workload, or our plans for the weekend. Eventually, students slowly opened up with long overdue cathartic venting. Not only did the professor gain insight into our daily struggles, but we became unified as a group, as many of us were experiencing the similar struggles. It was humanizing to hear our professor reveal her own exhaustion, tell a funny story, or acknowledge the adorable cat in someone’s background—she too had a cat, whom we all looked forward to greeting every class. Peter Walsh ridiculed what he assumed were Clarissa’s shallow intentions for hosting a party, yet Woolf makes it abundantly clear that Clarissa’s party is a means of personal connection so invaluable in a time of trauma and isolation. Like Clarissa, the professors who went out of their way fighting for connection where it was in scarce supply had the most success in fostering student engagement.

Professor: Long before I conceded that my altruistic teaching could not possibly be a one-semester remedy for students, no matter how resolutely and optimistically I taught them, I considered a parallel with Clarissa Dalloway’s reasons for hosting a party. Clarissa earnestly strives to help assuage postwar trauma, isolation, and despair by hosting one of her celebrated soirees. “[T]he supreme mystery . . . was simply this: here was one room; there another. Did religion solve that, or love?” (MD, pp. 164–65). Unlike love and religion, a party, freely given, lacks coercion; it is an effort to create community. Clarissa’s motivation is predominantly generous. She deplores Peter Walsh’s repeated insult that she wants to be celebrated as the perfect hostess, and she knows she is not merely entertaining herself, as her husband suspects.

But suppose Peter said to her, “Yes, yes, but your parties—what’s the sense of your parties?” all she could say was (and nobody could be expected to understand): They’re an offering; which sounded horribly vague . . . But to go deeper, beneath what people said (and these judgments, how superficial, how fragmentary they are!) in her own mind now, what did it mean to her, this thing she called life? Oh, it was very queer. Here was So-and-so in South Kensington; some one up in Bayswater; and somebody else, say, in Mayfair. And she felt quite continuously a sense of their existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom? (pp. 158–59)

Clarissa’s parties are hard work for her and her servants. The narrator does not mention how often she gives parties, but it is often enough that they are anticipated and discussed
by her usual guests, including Peter Walsh, absent from England for the past five years. Because they require so much preparation, they are far from everyday occurrences. “What she liked was simply life” (p. 158). Clarissa celebrates her society’s tenuous hold on life by inviting survivors of pandemic and war, a diverse group of friends and acquaintances, to spend a luxurious evening in company with one another.

As I made the mental connection between my classroom and Clarissa Dalloway’s parties, I recalled that every single time I teach the novel, a certain set of students regard the soiree as a frivolous, even pathetically inadequate endeavor to effect social change. But I recognized that this semester’s students’ questions about Clarissa’s motives for the party and, even more importantly, Woolf’s motives for crafting her novel to culminate in a party, seemed sharper, more urgent. This was the hint I missed that my students were overstretching their act of joining—or refusing to join—the authorial audience. Their questions were not only more intense than in any previous semester, but also, no matter how politely phrased, they communicated a more bitingly cynical suspicion of her purposes.

In composing Mrs Dalloway largely through free indirect discourse and reports of private thoughts, Woolf engages in what is called the politics of interiority: the socio-political ramifications of which characters’ minds an author chooses to illuminate and which ones remain obscure. The politics of interiority consists of a long history of novelists prioritizing the inner worlds of upper-middle and upper-class characters. Unsurprisingly, Woolf has often received criticism for snobbery in her representation of Clarissa’s party, given the scant attention devoted to the Dalloways’ servants’ perspectives. In her most recent scholarship, Woolf scholar Merve Emre offers a bold contradiction, asserting that Woolf’s depiction of inner lives at the party represents her sharpest critique of that politics in the novel: “By concentrating the energies of the governing class in a single place, the party seems to dull and flatten the thoughts of even upper- and middle-class characters who have been, up to this point in the novel, presented as psychologically complex . . . . [This decision] extends Woolf’s critique of the social system on the level of [narrative] style” (Emre 2021, p. 209, n378).

This concept proves surprisingly applicable to mid-pandemic teaching in higher education. In our current historical moment, more attention than ever is devoted to equity and access. This attention increases opportunities for underrepresented minorities to attend college, while a sizable percentage of white citizens surveyed in the U.S. indicate hostility toward the very premises of higher education. The popular devaluation of a college education is rooted, among other things, in hostility to conceptual and often abstract preparation for the labor market (e.g., theory and “soft skills”), the astronomical tuition and fees supporting most four-year colleges, and the consequential, exacerbated gap among social classes. Leading discussion-based classes at an unpretentious, urban university with an extraordinarily diverse student population means paying minute attention to the politics of interiority. Which authors does the syllabus highlight, and which ones does it overlook? How does one choose to guide and instruct students, not just superficially but in ways that change their interiority for the better? And how can the community we build in a given course enhance and nourish those changes so that, by learning experientially, such changes endure?

When I shared Emre’s critique with Emma, her response was immediate: What do we make of the fact that Elizabeth Dalloway’s mind is obscure during the party? Does Woolf’s politics of interiority discriminate against the novel’s youngest character? Given the extended sequence of scenes almost exclusively devoted to tracing movements of Elizabeth’s mind, I fail to see evidence that Woolf marginalizes Elizabeth’s interiority. But in considering Woolf’s politics of interiority as extended to “the level of [narrative] style” (Emre 2021, p. 209, n378), I find Emma’s question very productive. In the course of teaching Woolf’s most “teachable” novel, I had to wonder: Was my students’ resistance to a rhetorical reading of Woolf’s novel generational? Does trusting Woolf’s narrative voice, at this historical moment, present an exceptionally difficult challenge for my Generation Z students because of their age?
Student: A brain that is constantly exposed to global tragedies on a daily basis will become conditioned to their normalcy while also remaining deeply troubled by their contents. Catching up on current events is no longer contained to print newspapers or nightly airings of news broadcasts, but rather around-the-clock online articles and posts often circulated through social media. In 2020, *The New York Times* online revenue surpassed that of its print revenue for the first time, and this highlights a societal shift in how news is delivered to the public (Tracy 2021). In addition, United States government officials have increasingly flocked to *Twitter* and other social media apps to announce policies and legislation and to communicate with their constituents, in addition to traditional press releases. Social media has become integral in how the general public receives news. Given the scope of the internet, users have access to more than their local spheres, but rather, the entire world, making global events mesh with each other into a seemingly endless stream of trauma.

However, social media brings an additional element to global news that was more difficult to come by before the internet’s conception: photographic and video footage by ordinary people. If the terrorist attack on 9/11 were to happen today in 2022, social media would be flooded with primary source footage of individuals inside and outside the towers, live videos from the event, and haunting realities of countless individuals brought to life on your own screen. Perhaps also, more people would have been saved, given how quickly the news would have spread. I have seen videos of black men die on camera, women being brutally beaten, and children videotaping their experiences during school shootings because of social media. People half my age have seen these things as well. My tech-proficient generation can easily navigate to poignant, inhumane footage of current events online and become hypersensitive to the atrocities. Harrowing depictions of tragedy and violence can make them all too real in one’s mind, while at the same time, they can pull the events out of reality and place them in a part of the mind too sensitive to go near. The contradiction of feeling too much and nothing at all was something understood by Septimus Warren Smith.

Professor: Disengagement from virtual education as a consequence of social media acuity may be obvious to or subliminal for individual students, but for a large number of professors, the connection may be both invisible and unintuitive. The stressors of social media and students’ consequent reticence in remote learning pose a serious problem for teaching both now and whenever the pandemic reaches a manageable level.

Without recognizing the factors that contribute to a profound disjunction between students’ and professors’ viewpoints, many professors will carry on making faulty assumptions about students’ withdrawal. In addition to faculty’s mistaken inferences outlined in Section 2, above, a common but misinformed effort to remedy disengagement is the design of online courses with eye-catching, native digital interfaces. Pressured by administrators or forced by circumstances to create engaging, appealing online experiences for their students, professors eager to coax students into active participation present what they hope will be an irresistibly clever online interface. However, students may perceive that interface as a Potemkin village. “Sometimes I feel professors expect students to act like we are not in the middle of a global crisis”, Emma mentioned in one of our discussions. Although her comment was not a critique of my teaching, I now recognize how easily my notion of students’ idealistic, trusting immersion in literature as a respite from the pandemic can be misinterpreted by profoundly alienated students.

Whereas the impetus for building online courses from scratch is, for administrators, an effort to retain students, the powerful anxiety and distrust students experience in an online, mediated classroom has already prompted many students to withdraw from college altogether. Many students recognize precisely the danger identified by Susan Etlinger in warning of the “Potemkin Internet”.

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In the next several years we will see an increase in the type and volume of bad behavior online, mostly because there will be a corresponding increase in digital activity . . . Cyber attacks, doxing, and trolling will continue, while social platforms, security experts, ethicists, and others will wrangle over the best ways to balance security and privacy, freedom of speech, and user protections. A great deal of this will happen in public view. The more worrisome possibility is that privacy and safety advocates, in an effort to create a more safe and equal Internet, will push bad actors into more-hidden channels such as Tor. Of course, this is already happening, just out of sight of most of us. The worst outcome is that we end up with a kind of Potemkin Internet in which everything looks reasonably bright and sunny, which hides a more troubling and less transparent reality. (Rainey et al. 2017)

For over two decades, I have regarded Mrs Dalloway as Woolf’s most teachable novel, yet the challenge of teaching it to this generation of students in this moment turns out to be vastly more complicated than I had realized. It borders on unethical to offer the novel to students assuming that their best and most productive reading of the novel would treat it as a timely commentary on daily life. Students should not be asked to ignore our multiple global catastrophes, nor to celebrate a vision of their resolution without respectful, empathic anticipation of how students can—and will—misread a party as a grossly inadequate endeavor. Teaching the novel responsibly includes anticipating that students may very well sneer at the naivete they infer from both their literature professor and Woolf herself.

Woolf planned the structure and discourse of her novel with exacting attention to their details, writing to an imagined audience that appreciated Clarissa’s earnest effort to foster connection in a damaged, disillusioned society. Emre asserts that “[b]ehind [Woolf’s] insistence on pacing, balance, and design lay her immense ambition to cover the entire range of human perception and cognition—the opposition of ‘sanity and insanity’, ‘seeing the truth’ and ‘seeing the insane truth’”. Woolf illuminates as many searing insights through Septimus Warren Smith’s mind as she does through Clarissa’s. “Their thoughts would be made to converge, drawn together in moments of astonishing beauty to illuminate truths divined by the sane and insane alike—about being young and growing old, about the cruelty of war and the complacency of peace. This would permit [Woolf] to move from one character’s mind to another” (Emre 2021, p. xlix).

Today’s students’ perspectives on, and attitudes towards, higher education are as diverse as those of any previous generation of students, but many of them share an overwhelming cynicism about both the means and ends of illumination. It is dangerously simple to underestimate the tenacity of that cynicism. Our ethical responsibility as educators must be to honor the youthful humanity in all students, many of whom may act invulnerable, aloof. Young war veteran Septimus feels triumphant at maintaining equanimity by the end of the War, despite the deaths of his closest friend and other comrades. He “congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him. It was sublime . . . . The last shells missed him. He watched them explode with indifference”. And yet, the insulation and security of his indifference mutates, all at once, into a crippling limitation. “He could not taste, he could not feel. In the tea-shop among the tables and the chattering waiters the appalling fear came over him—he could not feel. He could reason; he could read, Dante for example (‘Septimus, do put down your book’, said Rezia, gently shutting the Inferno), he could add up his bill; his brain was perfect; it must be the fault of the world then—that he could not feel” (MD, p. 122). Irritable professors who think students are disengaged from learning out of laziness often assume students are not feeling. Emma and I hope that, in this article, we have persuaded readers that “cannot feel” behavior, in truth, signals feeling far too much.

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Notes
1 Whereas remote education signifies teaching converted from face-to-face interaction to electronic, socially distant education, online education is crafted from its inception as a digital experience for both professor and students. In this article, we use the two terms interchangeably for simplicity’s sake, until the final section of the essay, in which a distinction between the two makes a difference.
2 The devastation wrought worldwide by WWI is less important to Woolf’s authorial audience because Woolf’s effort in the novel is to explore how an individual person in a single culture at a specific cultural moment can contend with trauma from a vast loss.
3 The novel is set in mid-June, 1923.
4 But, of course, before the pandemic, we regularly taught first-year college students the skills and habits they needed for college, so the complaint about students’ lack of preparation lacks persuasive explanatory power. In addition to blaming the victim, such complaints tend to erase professors’ senses of responsibility for investigating the problem further. Most importantly, perhaps, steadfast antagonism toward students all but destroys the possibility of seeing the problem from their perspective.
5 Based on the theory of negative bias, where negative things have a greater psychological impact than positive or neutral things.
6 Professors’ reluctance to require cameras remain on, at least at our university, comes in part from recognition of the inequity of access. Not all students have adequate hardware or bandwidth for a visual feed.

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