

Artifacts, Virality, and Connection: Social Media and Teaching in the Age of COVID-19

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Like many educators in the United States and globally, my Spring semester was abruptly shifted to a virtual setting due to the COVID-19 outbreak. My two U.S. History 1877 to Present courses at the University of Central Florida (UCF) took on the new theme of crisis as I began teaching my students remotely. The move away from campus and my communication with students clued me into the generationally defining moment they were now navigating. As an educator and historian, I knew that I needed to shift my pedagogy towards crisis management, compassion, and understanding to support my students.

Ingrained in all of my courses is a self-reflective component where students use informal paragraphs to formulate ideas as a way to engage in critical thinking exercises. These low-stakes assignments pair with more significant formal assignments to build expansive abilities to reason and articulate arguments about challenging historical concepts. In one of these informal writing assignments, I asked my students to contextualize their COVID-19 experience through a personal artifact they would suggest to a historian or museum curator one hundred years in the future and why that particular object best represented their experience during the pandemic.¹ [See Appendix for assignment.]

¹ Kevin Mitchell Mercer, "A Professor Gives a Challenging Assignment; His Students' Responses Move Him to Tears," *USA Today*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/nation/2020/04/24/ucf-professors-coronavirus-artifact-assignment-brings-powerful-response/3017264001/>.

As my students' heartbreaking and poignant responses came back to me, I collected some of the ideas in a general social media post on Twitter on April 15 after an emotional grading session. I was humbled and proud of their powerful answers and felt they provided a narrative of COVID-19 that many were not discussing. Having been actively engaged with the academic Twitter community for years, specifically the #Twitterstorian community, it is not uncommon for me to share my teaching experiences broadly on social media. These tweets about my students' use of personal artifacts to represent their experience resonated, and my posts quickly spread through retweets to a broader audience. By midnight I was messaging with a reporter from the Washington Post looking to feature my students. In the following days, I would be asked to write a column for USA Today and appear on radio programs in the U.S. and Canada. Numerous invitations for COVID-19 centered public history projects and publication opportunities have followed. As contingent faculty, handling this interest in my teaching and my students' work has felt overwhelming at times. As I managed this viral moment, I remained student-focused in all of my public discussions, while engaging and sharing my teaching with a global community of educators and building a connective network in a time of crisis.

The publicity garnered by this tweet gave me a national and university-wide platform that most adjunct faculty never have. I constantly reminded myself that this platform was my students, and I was just their representative. As I shared my students' narratives with a broader audience, I wanted to make sure their voices and experiences drove the dialogue I was having. Simultaneously, I wanted to remain protective of my students. Many of their responses were raw and emotional; while I shared them generally and anonymously with the media and school administration, I was careful to seek permission for direct quotes and more detailed responses. I relied on strong relationships built during the first half of the semester and many students who

were taking a class with me for the second or third time to make sure my students never felt exposed or exploited, keeping my conversations firmly on their work and the transformative nature of the pandemic were critical. Through our Zoom meetings and Canvas announcements I worked to be transparent about the process of sharing this assignment publicly while also actively praising the thoughtful work they had done. My end of semester evaluations and continued engagement with many of my now former students have suggested I have been successful in keeping this viral moment focused on my students.

While managing this message for my students, I have also found myself in the midst of a larger global conversation with fellow educators. College professors and P-12 educators from around the world connected with me via Twitter and emailed to ask for the details of my artifact assignment, for suggestions on how to expand it into a larger project, and how to reproduce it for a variety of situations. Through sharing this assignment on social media, I have been able to connect directly and discuss teaching philosophies with educators in India, Malaysia, New Zealand, throughout Europe, and, of course, North America. At last count, over twenty educators have connected directly with me in one way or another to discuss applying my artifact assignment to their classrooms. It is humbling to imagine an assignment crafted for my students at UCF has been taught globally by fellow educators eager to help their own students contextualize the global pandemic.

At the same time, hundreds of global educators have begun following me on Twitter, creating an expanded long-term network of educators. As the COVID-19 pandemic wears on and the recent Black Lives Matter protests have also become a global phenomenon, I have been able to engage this network with teaching plans for the Fall as we all prepare to teach again in a quickly changing world.

It is through this connectivity during crisis that the positive power of social media has become apparent. As many of us have been forced into work from home situations, we have lost the formal and informal networks that the physical college campus provides. The COVID-19 pandemic increased unemployment, and social unrest has cultivated a shifting landscape for researchers and educators. While social media has notable challenges, networks such as Twitter can be crafted into sites of positive interactions and professional development. Long after my artifact tweet had gone viral, I have found community with others navigating the same challenges around the globe. Sharing practices and perspectives on the unprecedented politics of this global moment has allowed me to redraft expansive lessons for future classes while allowing professional interpersonal connections necessary for contingent faculty to continue their development as they continue to work towards fulltime employment in academic or adjacent careers.

I have long advocated for academics and educators to utilize social media to engage with one another and the public at large. The discussions of our work, both in the archives and in the classroom, can bring positive attention to our work and broadcast the necessary civic actions our careers need to remain relevant and funded. As the COVID-19 pandemic has moved across the world, altering our personal and professional lives, social media has provided an opportunity to engage beyond our campuses' physical structures. Through one viral tweet focused on a COVID-19 focused assignment, I have been provided the opportunity to share my students' challenging new reality, help other educators share this assignment with their students, and develop new networks that I can continue to rely on as the world remains increasingly challenged by the pandemic and social unrest. This one viral moment has proven an opportunity to amplify the goal of educators everywhere, that is, of helping to craft a better world.

Appendix: COVID-19 Artifact Assignment

The original assignment was part of my overall goal to encourage critical thinking with many quick low-stakes writing assignments. These short paragraphs were assigned throughout the semester as opportunities for students to contextualize their readings and the class lectures, formulate ideas for larger projects, and report on their understanding of key ideas. Oftentimes these assignments would ask students to reflect on their study habits and test preparation. As the COVID-19 pandemic shifted our class online and I noticed my students were eager for an outlet to process this transitional moment in their lives, I crafted this writing prompt:

For this assignment, I would like for you to think of a historic artifact that would be representative of your experience as a college student during the COVID-19 pandemic. What one item would you want to put into a museum to help tell the story of your life 100 years from now?

To encourage my students to move beyond the obvious I set some ground rules. They were not able to say their cell phone, Zoom, Skype, or Netflix. I took this opportunity to explain digital versus tangible archives and added the caveat that their artifact could not be digital. I encouraged them to use personal artifacts and not medical items like masks or test kits. I finished the prompt by explaining it could be personal or something significant to their community, and also suggested it could be education-related. Finally, I insisted they write a paragraph to explain the significance of the item and how it would tell people in the future about their personal experience as a college student during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This assignment is scalable for different situations and age groups. While I kept my students' answers private, classrooms could craft a virtual exhibit with PowerPoint slides. I did

not ask my students for images, but submitting pictures of their artifact could provide an opportunity for connectivity with remote teaching.

The power and essence of this assignment is to allow students to understand the implications of a pandemic through extremely personal perspectives, reminding us that historic moments can be both extremely personal and globally shared.