

# Centering the Human in an Online Literature Class

5-minute “ignite” presentation @ OWI Symposium 2024

Jason C. Evans, Professor of English

Prairie State College

Here’s the problem: In my asynchronous literature survey courses, I feel like I was increasingly watching ChatGPT talk to itself.

Here’s the solution: We should have live discussion groups.

Here’s my thinking:

- First thought: something like Oxford tutorials for individuals, as an alternative, high-quality literacy interaction.
- BUT enrollment capacity is 22 students, which would be difficult time-wise...
- SO I would try small groups instead.

Why small groups?

- The joy and magic of community...
- Live discussion is difficult to fake.
- Live discussion captures some of what’s great about literature classes.
- New opportunity to do instruction in close reading.
- I assign follow-up posts in the LMS, so that students still get to write.

Here’s how it works [[see rubric at this link](#)]:

- Students do the reading.
- Students select a time to show up on Google Meet to discuss the reading:
  - Tuesday, 8-9 PM
  - Tuesday, 9-10 PM
  - Wednesday, 12-1 PM
  - Friday, 11 AM - 12 PM
  - Friday, 12-1 PM
- Students post in the LMS within 48 hours of their small group meeting. (I often do a final “check out” during the small group: “I’m leaving thinking about...”)
- To go above & beyond (i.e. earn an A or B), students do all of that PLUS:
  - ...post an additional reply to someone else within 24 hours of their first post (i.e. within 72 hours of the small group meeting).
  - ...prepare discussion questions or post in the LMS before the small group meeting.

Here's what I like about it so far:

- I look forward to these conversations.
- Each group has a distinctive composition and behaviors and personality.
- It feels convivial and meaningful.
- People mostly turn their cameras on. :)
- It generally feels sustainable, in terms of workload.
- For students who aren't comfortable talking, or don't know how to read to prepare for this kind of discussion, an individual intervention seemed to have paid off.

Here's what I'm wondering about:

- Will this work when we're not reading short stories? Next semester I'll be teaching British Literature I online...
- What about students who claim to be too busy/unavailable at the times I have outlined? I have no "plan B" in the syllabus for someone who can't make it.
- How can I maintain vibrancy and community in the LMS, when it's kind of an after-thought?

Here's what they're saying in anonymous short surveys so far (I had them weigh options for the A/B work and invited general feedback):

- i really enjoy the small group discussions on google meets. I would definitely keep doing that for future classes. It makes it feel like more than just a class online. I wish more teachers would do that because i feel like i can actually engage with my teacher and they can see me/ get to know me more. Im more than just another student doing school online. Great job with that concept Jason! It makes me feel like im back in school again.
- This class is the highlight of my week and I'm looking forward to exploring more themes, characters, plots and writing styles. Our virtual discussions is a vital part of why this class is so awesome! Thank you for letting us be ourselves.
- Jason, I'm having a ton of fun in your class! I'd love to focus more on responses if you are looking for a future goal. Maybe having themes discussed and our opinions on them? Hope all is well.
- Your form of teaching makes me comfortable and prepared for our small group exchanges. Although you have expectations for us, you are a nice instructor, thank you.
- So far this course is my favorite. I'm always looking forward to group discussions and the stories you chose for this semester have been perfect.

Here's why I think this approach is relevant:

- "I'm more than just another student doing school online."
- Closest I've seen to this level of interpretive community is in ALP basic writing classes, where there were 5-10 students who had grown accustomed to doing peer review and were awesome at it. This could translate nicely to online composition.