Center for Experimental Humanities
Bard College

EH Response to COVID-19
Creative Assignment Ideas for Teaching at a Distance
https://eh.bard.edu/covid-19/

With campuses moving online in response to COVID-19, most transition guides offer helpful introductions to using learning management systems, web-enabled video meetings, and more (at Bard, this information is available at https://www.bard.edu/it/course-continuity/). However, faculty still need to decide what we will actually *do* with our students online, asynchronously and at a distance -- which is why we developed this list of assignment ideas, which offer ways of rethinking how students might meaningfully engage with course content under these differently mediated circumstances.

Experimental Humanities faculty members routinely assign creative, hands-on, and accessible projects using a range of technologies (old and new!) in our courses. Colleagues in all four divisions of the college have contributed to the list of relatively low-tech assignment ideas below, which we hope others can use and modify according to the content and learning goals of their courses -- whatever the topic or field. These ideas may be used as prompts for discussion threads, individual or group assignments, or final projects, and can supplement or replace synchronous meetings. Remember that each one takes time to prepare, explain, complete, and share -- so select just a few, and plan to space them out so as to not overburden students or yourself.

It's important to remember that teaching at a distance through a global pandemic is perhaps the *definition* of an extraordinary situation: developing online courses usually takes a huge investment of time and resources before the semester even begins. Switching halfway will take creativity, flexibility, and a spirit of experimentation. It can help to recognize that your course will likely not be the same once moved online; it will be imperfect, an ongoing experiment, and that is okay. Above all, we want to be sensitive to our students' and communities' needs, be reasonable with ourselves and others, and foreground how we can best help students learn humanely under these conditions.

Special thanks to the Bard colleagues who worked with me to develop this list, including Krista Caballero, Omar Cheta, Christian Crouch, Adhaar Noor Desai, Jeanette Estruth, Miriam Felton-Dansky, Keith O'Hara, and Gabriel Perron.

-- Maria Sachiko Cecire, Director of EH

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1. Assignments students can do on their own

REFLECTIVE WALKING:

Ask students to pose, in writing, a difficult question related to the assigned reading or the course more broadly, especially one that they have struggled with (or are currently wrestling with). Then they should take a 20-60 minute walk, undistracted by a podcast or other content. After returning from the walk, they should try to respond to the question in writing as best they can. Finally, they should write a brief reflection on how the process of formulating the question and mulling on it during their walk affected their response to it.
- Activity may take place: individually, outdoors
- Submit assignment: in person, email, learning management system / online post

PERSONAL NARRATIVE:

Ask students to identify one personal experience that relates to the course. The experience can be a personal anecdote or a wider-ranging reflection on a concept from the course that they found especially compelling for a personal reason. Ask students to share this experience or concept and why it is meaningful to them, using one of an array of formats and media. These may include a written essay, short fiction, poetry, illustration, comics, film, music recording, podcast, etc. In addition to the personal narrative, the students should write a brief reflection about the assignment: what was it like to connect the course content to their own lives so personally? What medium(s) did they use for the personal narrative, and how did it affect their process? The students' work may be shared with other classmates via the class website, learning management system (Google Classroom or similar), over email, or in print, but students should be alerted to this *before* they submit the assignment, and have the ability to opt-out of such wide sharing. Such sharing can serve as the jumping-off point for online discussion threads, synchronous conversation in person or virtually, and other written responses.
- Activity may take place: individually
- Submit assignment: in person, email, learning management system / online post

DESIGN A MEAL:

Ask students to design a meal related to the course, researching the origin, history, and cultural context of every ingredient and its presentation. The students should describe their choices in writing -- including justifying the layout, the choice of table settings, and seating chart where appropriate, and provide an image to represent this meal (this may be drawn, collaged, photographed, found online, or otherwise creatively represented). If possible, the student should be encouraged to prepare and host the meal (or at least a dish!) for members of their in-person community wherever they are. In addition to providing their menu description, ask them to reflect on the process in writing: What was it like to translate course material into a meal? What was difficult or unexpected in doing the research? How did they make difficult decisions (e.g. who should sit next to each other)? What informed their decisions in creating the image? This assignment may be posted directly to the class website, learning management system (Google

Classroom or similar), or shared in other ways as the jumping-off point for discussion online or in person.
- Activity may take place: individually or in pairs / small groups
- Submit assignment: in person, email, learning management system / online post

VISUALIZE A CONCEPT:

Ask students to visualize content of their choice from the course (e.g. theoretical concepts, networks of people and information, settings in literary texts, datasets, etc.). Encourage students to consider an array of visualization techniques and tools such as diagrams, graphs, timelines, maps, and more, possibly producing different drafts using different techniques before settling on a choice. They may opt to do this digitally or by hand, or in some combination. Finally, the students should write a brief reflection about the assignment: How did visualization change or affect their understanding of the concept? What visualization tool(s) or medium(s) did they use and how did it affect their process? The instructor may choose to share these visualizations via the class website, learning management system (Google Classroom or similar), over email, or in other ways, possibly as the jumping-off point for online discussion threads, synchronous conversation in person or virtually, and other written responses.
- Activity may take place: individually or in pairs / small groups
- Submit assignment: in person, email, learning management system / online post

PERSUASIVE WRITING:

Ask students to distill the ideas in this course into a three-page letter, written to a member of your family or close community that you think would most resist its ideas and frameworks. Try to be as clear and concise as possible, while also persuasively presenting evidence and and arguments in a way that you think would most win this person over. Students can feel free to use a pseudonym for the addressee, and there should be no expectation that this letter will be sent or shared in real life (though that's up to the student!). Then the students should write a brief reflection about the assignment: without having to identify specifically who the recipient of the letter is, explain what this person's objections to the course content or framing might be, and where they come from. What strategies does your letter use to try to overcome these objections? How did writing this letter make you feel? What did you learn about the course content and/or its relevance in the world from doing this assignment?
- Activity may take place: individually
- Submit assignment: in person, email, learning management system / online post

YOUR COURSE IN THE NEWS:

Ask students to select an article from this week's news stories that relates to some element of the course such as a recent reading, a theoretical concept, or a statistical / visualization / media method they are learning. They should explain the content of the article and how it relates to the course in writing (for instance, discussing how a theme from the reading appears in current discourse, or how the method they are learning is being deployed in the article). What is the news source, and how might this influence the way that the course content appears in this particular article? Then the students should write a brief reflection about the assignment: what was it like to find course material reflected in current events? Were you satisfied with the way

that the article treated it? Why or why not? This assignment may be posted directly to the class website, learning management system (Google Classroom or similar), or shared in other ways as the jumping-off point for discussion online or in person.

- Activity may take place: individually
- Submit assignment: in person, email, learning management system / online post

RESEARCH THROUGH COLLAGE:

Pose a focused question related to your course's content, and then ask students to collage their answer! Encourage students to use their creativity in how they develop and arrange the collage, and in how they select their materials. These may come from magazines and other printed paper, but also from other bits and pieces of everyday life (food wrappers, cloth, organic material, e-waste, and more) and/or collaged digital sources. Students will need to photograph their physical collages (from multiple perspectives, if three-dimensional) if they are submitting them digitally. *Students can create sound collages as well, just by using the voice memo app on their phone, if they have a smartphone*! Then the students should write a brief reflection about the assignment that explains their collage and process: how are you trying to answer this question visually? What materials did you select for this assignment, and why? What was your experience of making the collage? Did it affect the way you think about the question, or of the course more broadly? This assignment may be posted directly to the class website, learning management system (Google Classroom or similar), or shared in other ways as the jumping-off point for discussion online or in person.

- Activity may take place: individually
- Submit assignment: in person, email, learning management system / online post

CURATE/ATTEND A MEDIA FESTIVAL:

Ask students to curate a film festival, music playlist, art show, tasting menu, or other media collection related to the course or some specific element of the course. The instructor should set the number of items that students may include ahead of time, and students should ideally choose items that are available free online or via easily accessible streaming services. Their curated media list should be submitted with a written explanation for the choice of each item, its placement in the festival, its resonances with other selected items, and the overall festival's relationship to the course. This may take the form of an essay or blog post, or be imagined as a festival program, liner notes, exhibition catalog, etc., with live links to the media items if submitted digitally. Students should also write a separate reflection on the assignment: what was it like to select these items? What challenges did you encounter, and how did you overcome them? Did thinking about course questions through this medium affect the way you think about the course material? If so, how? This assignment may be posted directly to the class website, learning management system (Google Classroom or similar), or shared in other ways as the jumping-off point for discussion online or in person, or as the precursor to Part 2 (below).

In the optional part 2, **Attend a media festival**, classmates may pick another student's curated media festival (or, for a shorter assignment, one item in that festival) and write a reflection about the encounter or experience, making reference to not only the particular item(s) but also the festival's overarching theme and perspective on the course content.

Students can also share their own or a classmate's media festival (and/or individual items) with their home communities, explained in the context of the course, and write about that experience and the feedback they received from people outside the course. This assignment can also provide shared material for the **Salon / Science Café** or **Book / journal / film club** assignments.

- Activity may take place: individually or in pairs / small groups in person or via phone call, videochat, messaging app, email
- Submit assignment: in person, email, learning management system / online post

NAMING AND MAPPING:

Have your students select a seemingly familiar area outdoors to explore. Based upon course topics, select something for the students to "map." Some ideas include: pathways of telecommunication lines; species of plants or animals; sound; locations for waste and recycling; architectural relationships. Create a map visualization in response to this exploration using any kind of materials (digital or analog) you have available. Depending upon topic, some questions to consider: How do we "map" other objects, systems, and species? What does this tell us about our relationships with them? What values do you bring to your map? What are the power structures that have influenced and shaped your information? Write a brief reflection that explains the map visualization and process.

- Activity may take place individually or in pairs / small groups in person or via phone call, videochat, messaging app
- Submit assignment: in person, email, learning management system / online post

2. Assignments students can do with other members of the class

COLLECTIVELY ANNOTATE / CLOSE READ TEXT OR IMAGE:

Type or paste a passage of text related to the course into **google docs**[1], and assign a group of students to annotate it using the comment feature (Insert → Comment). Be sure to share the link with the students (there is a share button on the upper right of the GD window), making them all editors on the document. If annotating an image, have them follow **these instructions**[2], which are a bit different. They may do their annotation and analysis asynchronously or synchronously; if they annotate or close read synchronously, they can use the google docs chat function that appears when there are multiple editors in a shared doc (using a button on the upper right of the GD window). You may wish to have them follow up such annotation / close reading by proposing an argument or claim about the text as a group or as individuals, or use the annotation as the foundation for developing new research questions. Finally, ask students to submit a reflection on the process: what was easy? What was difficult? How does group analysis differ from doing it alone? How does online annotation compare to doing it by hand?
- Activity may take place: in groups using google docs or another annotation platform (such as hypothes.is, free through 2020)
- Submit assignment: google doc / annotation platform + email, learning management system / online post

BOOK / JOURNAL / FILM CLUB:

Break the class into small groups of 3-6 students, and ask them to meet synchronously (in person or using a videochat application) to discuss a predetermined text or section of text -- in addition to printed material this can be film, performance documentation, and more. This should be free-ranging, open-ended, and informal, although you (and they!) may find it helpful if you offer some guiding questions to get them started. Ask them to take a selfie or screenshot of themselves to share with you, and have each student send a reflection on the experience: What was different about holding a discussion in this way, as opposed to in a classroom setting? What was the same? Did certain topics or ideas emerge that they think might not have in front of the professor or the whole class? What medium(s) did they use to meet, and how did it affect the conversation? A variation on this is to break students up into small working/affinity groups that they will stay in for the rest of the semester. (see below: **Discussion / writing buddies**)
- Activity may take place: in groups that meet in person or via phone call, videochat, messaging app
- Submit assignment: in person, email, learning management system / online post

QUESTION ROULETTE:

Ask each student to formulate a thoughtful question related to the reading or course more generally that they genuinely would like to know the answer to. They should then send the question to the instructor by a certain deadline. The instructor will then (using any randomized system you like) forward the question to another student in the class, who should try to answer

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[1] http://docs.google.com/
[2] https://rampages.us/support/google/google-docs-annotate-images/

the question in as much detail, drawing upon as much reliable evidence, as possible. Every student will devise a question *and* develop a response to another student's question. The instructor can create a collective spreadsheet or other shared space (using **google sheets**[3] or similar) where students can find the question that they have answered and insert their responses so that the whole class may see all questions and responses. The instructor may want to add another round of public responses to each question in order to comment upon, and (when needed) complete or gently correct student responses. Finally, students should write a reflection on the experience: what was it like to receive an individualized question like this? What was it like to try to work out the answer on your own? What resources did you draw upon to do this?

- Activity may take place: individually, or be done in pairs/small groups in person or via phone call, videochat, messaging app, email
- Submit assignment by: email, google sheets, learning management system / online post

See also: **Visualize a concept**, **Design a meal, Curate a media festival**

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[3] http://www.google.com/sheets/about

3. Asynchronous class discussion methods

ONLINE FORA/DISCUSSION THREADS:

This will be likely the most widely used mode of asynchronous class discussion in an online setting, using a learning management system (like Google Clasroom or similar), blog, or other platform. Instructors will want to provide clear guidelines for students about when posts and responses are due (date and time), what students should be writing about (even for open-ended responses, some kind of prompt will be helpful, whether it's a specific question to answer or instructions for what kinds of things to include in a more freeform response), and how long student posts should be if that is a factor in assessment (about how many sentences, words, or paragraphs). Similarly, if students are expected to respond to each other, this should be stated explicitly. Instructors should try to make this as clear and low-stress an intellectual space as possible, in order to extend or create something like the community we often feel in our in-person classrooms.
- Activity may take place: individually
- Submit assignment by: learning management system / online post

DISCUSSION / WRITING BUDDIES:

It can be helpful to assign every member of the class a discussion and writing buddy with whom to carry on regular conversation about the course material via an array of synchronous and asynchronous methods, check in about assignments and other admin, and read and offer feedback on assignments. Some instructors may find it helpful to break students into groups of three rather than two, in case one student loses touch or has to pause their studies for any reason. If instructors use the buddy system, they will want to explain why the system is being used, offer clear guidelines about how often buddies are expected to work with each other, and describe the concrete outcomes that they expect from each of these check-ins (such as posing questions about the material to the instructor, peer editing/crit and feedback on individual work, a screenshot of their text exchange or videochat, co-authored google doc with each person's contribution in a different color, or any of the assignments listed on this page that can be turned into small group work).

Buddies can do either asynchronous or synchronous activities together; crucially, they can determine the best mediums in which to hold their own meetings based on their circumstances. This can create flexibility for students who have different kinds of access, but also create an automatic go-to group of classmates for each student, which helps with inclusion.
- Activity may take place: in pairs / small groups in person or via phone call, videochat, messaging app, email
- Submit assignments: in person, email, learning management system / online post

INSTRUCTOR RESPONSES TO STUDENT DISCUSSION:

In order to respond to student discussion in a clear and focused way, instructors may wish to establish a regular system of commenting on asynchronous or synchronous student discussions about the course content. Through activities such as **Online fora/discussion threads** and **Small group discussion / writing buddies**, instructors may gather student questions, interpretations, and claims about course material and use these as the jumping-off point for producing writing, audio, or video responses. For seminar-style courses where student-instructor discourse is central to learning, such a mode of response can create opportunities for back-and-forth exchange in an asynchronous way and replace (or supplement) standalone lectures.

Note: audio and video recording can result in large file sizes that can be difficult for students to access in low-bandwidth circumstances. Keep such responses brief to minimize file size, and/or consult with IT about how best to manage file size so that students can access this material.

- Share with students: email, learning management system (Google classroom has a built-in video-recording function) / online post

4. Assignments students can do with their local communities

TEACH ANOTHER PERSON:

Have students sit down with a family member, friend, or other person *not in this course*. Ask them to teach this person either a particular concept from the course or one of their choice. Then ask them to report on the interaction: what was easy? What was difficult? What did they learn about the subject matter by having to teach it to someone else? What medium(s) did they use to hold the lesson, and how did it affect the conversation?

       Activity may take place: in person or via phone call, videochat, messaging app
       Submit assignment: in person, email, learning management system / online post

HOLD AN INTERVIEW:

Have students prepare questions in advance and then interview a family member, friend, or other person *not in this course* about a concept or topic related to the course. The interview should focus on how or whether the interviewee has experienced some aspect of this topic in their own lives. Students should treat the interviewee as the expert and resist contradicting or correcting the interviewee during the interview. They should take notes and/or record the interview, with the interviewee's permission. Then ask the students to write up a piece that reports on the interview in a concise, well-organized way, quoting the interviewee regularly. Finally, students should write a reflection on the experience: What did they learn about the concept or topic by speaking to someone in their life about it? What felt frustrating? What was enlightening? What medium(s) did they use to hold the interview, and how did it affect the conversation?

       Activity may take place: in person or via phone call, videochat, messaging app
       Submit assignment: in person, email, learning management system / online post

SALON / SCIENCE CAFÉ:

Ask students to invite a number of people (e.g. classmates, friends, family members) and ask them to lead a discussion related to a reading, a topic, or a question of their choice related to the course, to be agreed upon with the other participants beforehand. The meeting can be held in person or using a videochat application. Then ask the students to report on the interaction: What did they learn about the subject matter by having a group discussion with both experts and non-experts? What were the challenges of having a group discussion and how did they overcome it? What medium(s) did they use to meet, and how did it affect the conversation?

- Activity may take place: in person or via phone call, videochat
- Submit assignment: in person, email, learning management system / online post

See also: **Design a meal, Curate/Attend a media festival** (for assignments that can be shared with local communities)

5. End-of-term assignments

BLOG OR DISCUSSION THREAD AUDIT:

Towards the end of the semester, ideally before assigning final papers and projects, ask students to read back through all of the posts that they have contributed to online discussions in the class and write a reflection on their own work. Ask them: How do you feel about your writing and thinking over the semester? Do you think your writing changed at all? If so, how? What post are you most proud of, and why? Which do you feel least happy with, and why? Do you notice any patterns in the topics and ideas that you gravitated towards? If so, what are these? Students may wish to use this reflective assignment as a jumping-off point to determining the subject matter of their final papers or projects.

- Activity may take place individually
- Submit assignment: in person, email, learning management system / online post

CREATIVE FINAL PROJECTS:

There are many formats and approaches to assigning open-ended creative final projects. The example below brings together critical making and analytical writing, and integrates a multi-stage process that includes a proposal phase, an online exhibition that the whole class can view and comment upon (this may be developed as a separate assignment once they are all uploaded to a course website or learning management system), and a critical statement/essay.

Instructors are encouraged to provide feedback at the proposal stage, either in writing or in one-on-one meetings, as this is a key moment to help guide students as they think through and develop their projects. In addition to or in place of the proposal, instructors can build in a "draft" and "feedback" stage of the final project, even if you are not able to have students share their drafts in class. For instance, students can share an outline, script, video, object, etc., and you can assign them round-robin-style to offer feedback on 1-2 other students' projects.

> Sample assignment:
> Working on your own or in groups of up to 4, design a project that speaks to one or more of the major themes from our course this semester. You must develop your own question about some element of the course content, and attempt to answer or expand upon it in a humanistic essay that take a form other than academic writing. Your project should draw upon at least (x number of) primary and (x number of) secondary texts that we have covered together during the semester.
>
> To create your project, choose a medium in which you have some measure of technical expertise and which fits your topic. This may be something we've used in class, a digital medium, or something else entirely. Choose a medium that makes sense in the context of your project's interests. Beyond this, be creative!
>
> Submit 1-page project proposal by (date, time) via (method of submission). This should include your name(s), the question you are posing, your proposed medium, and at least one key quote from a relevant theorist, critic, or thinker we have discussed in the course.

Your <u>final project</u> is due on (date, time) via (method of submission). You should accompany it with a brief (200-300-word) <u>abstract</u> describing the question you're addressing, and how your project attempts to tackle it through your chosen medium. These will be posted for the whole class to see and share in a virtual exhibition.

In addition, you will need to submit a (x)-page <u>statement essay</u> on (date, time) via (method of submission). The statement must:
      a) Identify the question you're addressing
      b) State your argument in the project
      c) Engage maturely with (x number of) primary and (x number of) secondary texts that we have covered together during the semester. Describe what elements of these texts come into play in your project, and explain how or where they appear in your project (essentially, close-read your own piece)
      d) Describe each group member's contribution to the project (for groups)
      e) Include a bibliography

Your project will be assessed according to the following criteria:
      • Maturity of the question you are exploring
      • Clarity of your argument
      • Understanding of relevant sources
      • Quality, creativity, and appropriateness of project
      • Thoughtfulness, thoroughness, and writing quality of the statement/essay
      • Timely completion of each stage of the project

- Activity may take place: individually or in pairs / small groups via an array of communications media
- Submit assignment: in person, email, learning management system / online post

DESIGN ANOTHER COURSE UNIT:

If you are using a course reader, anthology, or course textbook, have students explore parts of this text not covered by your course (or recycle extant course readings into new pairings) in order to design a 1-week "unit" of readings (excerpts, chapters, poems, passages) complete with a short introductory lecture, handouts, and discussion questions. If you are utilizing video lectures and activities for your remote course design, encourage students to make their own video lectures. In effect, throughout the semester, model and unpack what you do to prepare for class as an example for what students might do for their final projects. If using a textbook, discuss your approach to presenting a chapter; if using an anthology of readings, consider how you approach your course unit "themes" and how you stage them. Students might design these final projects individually, or—better yet—in groups, so they can workshop ideas and activities with one another. If you have enough time and few groups, these units might actually be implemented in the course, but they might also just be made available to the class for continued learning. Students might, as a capstone, reflect on what it means to teach texts and concepts in your discipline in a final written assignment.

<u>Sample assignment:</u>

Phase 1: Professor discusses their own approach to "unit" design, and points to how they themselves used the course textbooks to structure these units. Reflecting on the syllabus as it currently exists, discuss the progression of the material, the learning goals, and how the activities relate to those goals.

Phase 2: Students, individually or (ideally) in groups, peruse the unexplored parts of the course materials, and "pitch" potential units to professors in 250-word abstracts outlining 1) the "concept" of the unit and how it fits into the course themes 2) potential readings from the course reader (or elsewhere)

Phase 3: Students write lectures or record introductions (in text, video, audio/podcast--ideally, whatever the professor has been modeling) and design activities/discussion questions for their unit. These should be for each "session" the class meets within the unit (2 meetings allows for the readings to link to one another, meaning 2 introductions and 2 activities/sets of discussion questions).

Phase 4: Students present their units to the rest of the class. These can actually be implemented in the course (if there are only a few groups) or can be shared by the professor at the end of the semester. Once posted, each individual student will write a 2-3 page reflection discussing either 1) their own approach to designing the unit and how it reinforces the methods and concepts of the course as a whole *or* 2) the success of the unit and course design once implemented (if possible) *or* 3) the success of another group's unit, offering constructive feedback.

The project will be assessed on the following criteria:
- o The coherence of the unit in concept and execution
- o The introductions/lectures execution in terms of organization, attention to detail, and clarity
- o The robustness of the activities in terms of attentiveness to the assigned materials/ readings (did you select good excerpts/passages to foreground?) or in terms of the materials introduced in class to accompany the readings (do the handouts offer productive new perspectives or raise challenging questions?).
- o The thoughtfulness of the reflective essay in terms of composition, organization, and deliberation over how the core concept was translated into readings and activities

- Activity may take place: individually or in pairs / small groups via an array of communications media
- Submit assignment: "Units" may be submitted to the professor digitally, and distributed via the platform/mechanisms the class has been using throughout the semester

6. Additional Resources:

Bard IT's course continuity page:
https://www.bard.edu/it/course-continuity/

Ensuring accessible teaching:
https://www.mapping-access.com/blog-1/2020/3/10/accessible-teaching-in-the-time-of-covid-19

HASTAC online resources for teaching in context of COVID-19:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1yBE1cCqJ_4M-JZ62K4CefmYsZugqAWkGmZmdwESt0IM/