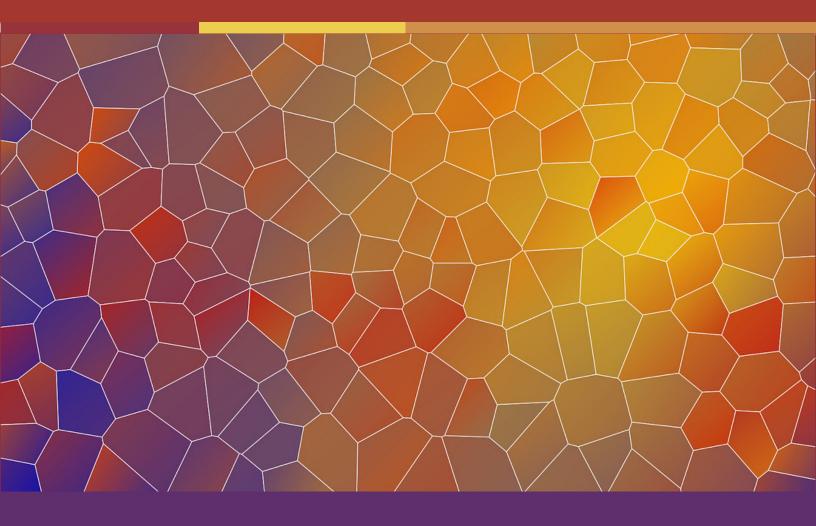# Currents

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TEACHING REPORT

Using the Past to Inform the Future: An Interdisciplinary Collaboration to Address Undergraduate Pandemic Concerns
—Suzanne Grossman and Danielle DeRise

Suzanne Grossman, Assistant Professor, Department of Health Sciences, James Madison University.

Danielle DeRise, Lecturer, School of Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication, James Madison University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: grossmsx@jmu.edu

Abstract

Many university instructors have wrestled with how to address pandemic realities in their classrooms. This paper documents a cross-disciplinary collaboration using Katherine Anne Porter's novella, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider,* which was paired with the social ecological model (SEM), to identify the different levels of student understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thematic coding of students' written responses to two assignment prompts revealed that students were concerned about the accuracy of disease portrayal, mental health, personal outcomes of disease, moving on from the pandemic, and the role of current events (e.g., news media). Findings also showed that while student responses focused on the individual, community, and society/policy levels of the SEM, there were no responses at the interpersonal level. This study suggests that instructors can employ creative approaches and use trauma-informed and culturally responsive pedagogies to help students reflect on sensitive current events.

Keywords

active learning, learner-centered discussions, COVID-19, interdisciplinary collaboration, trauma-informed and culturally responsive pedagogies, social ecological model

Background

Broad Importance of Discussing Historical Events in the Classroom

When COVID-19 suddenly disrupted life in March 2020, most university instructors dealt with an abrupt transition to teaching online. Those with varying levels of online teaching experience were challenged to move classes designed for in-person learning to a virtual format. Additionally, the question arose of how, and how much, to address the pandemic in their classes. Talking too much about COVID-19 could cause stress for students, especially those who had experienced loss or trauma due to the virus, and it could also distract from course objectives. However, ignoring COVID-19 could make instructors seem out of touch with the realities of the pandemic. For some instructors, integrating a few relevant lessons or texts provided an opportunity to address the pandemic without overwhelming students, thus establishing the instructor as being sensitive to the myriad issues facing the public during this crisis.

The strong historical parallels between the 1918 influenza (flu) and COVID-19 pandemics steered the authors of this paper toward encouraging students to reflect on their own experiences about living through a pandemic through studying a historical example. One of the authors (DD), a lecturer in writing and humanities, invited the other author (SG), a faculty member in health sciences, to be a guest lecturer in her humanities

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class in Summer 2020. The lesson focused on pairing the social ecological model (SEM), a common framework in public health, with *Pale Horse, Pale Rider,* a work of literature by Katherine Anne Porter, as a way for students to understand, articulate, and remember the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper reports on the collaboration across disciplines and identifies key themes that emerged in students' writing assignments to show how fiction and interdisciplinary collaborations can be useful tools for facilitating difficult conversations in the classroom.

Pale Horse, Pale Rider

Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* is one of the few American fictional works to feature the 1918 flu pandemic as a central plot point (Bollinger, 2013; Davis, 2011). This novella has been widely regarded by Porter's biographers (for example, Unrue, 1985) as a depiction that closely approximated Porter's own near-death brush with the flu during the 1918 pandemic, which claimed the lives of at least 625,000 people in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). At the end of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider,* the protagonist, Miranda, finally emerges from her flu-induced delusions, remarking to herself that she has "one foot in either world now" (Porter, 1939, p.165). Soon after waking, Miranda also learns that her lover, Adam, has died from the virus. Even though she has managed to survive, Miranda seems to feel marked by death. Porter has remarked in interviews that her own near-death experience with the flu was a singularly life-altering event, one that she was not able to talk or write about for many years (Potter, 2013). Although she did finally manage to produce this important, fictionalized account of the pandemic, it seems many other survivors were unable or unwilling to chronicle the trauma.

Literature scholar Davis, in *Psychoanalysis, culture, and trauma* (2011), asserts that a "distinction between individual trauma and collective trauma leads to an explanation for how and why the [1918] pandemic has virtually disappeared from collective memory" (p. 65). Additionally, trauma theorist Caruth (1991) analyzes catastrophes that have befallen entire populations, such as wars, to conclude that "it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that *survival itself*, in other words, can be a crisis" (p. 9). The lingering feeling of still being in a crisis, even after it has passed, may explain why some shy away from

remembering or chronicling difficult events. However, in a study chronicling the 1918 flu pandemic, Barry (2004) complicates the issue further by noting the abundance of writing that exists about human-made catastrophes (i.e., wars), but relatively scant information about natural disasters, such as pandemics. Davis (2011) considers the possibility that in an era of coexisting catastrophes, namely World War I and a deadly global pandemic, accounts of the war "dwarfed" those of the virus due to political pressures at the time (p. 63).

Regardless of the explanation for why so few accounts exist, there is value in Porter's historical chronicle of her lived experience, particularly because of its fictionalized qualities. Trauma scholars Felman and Laub (1992) note the value of literature for helping readers recall historical events. In analyzing the work of Felman and Laub, Davis (2011) concludes that as a work of literature, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* "connects the reader to the pandemic" (p. 63) in a way that other artifacts cannot, precisely because it blends events of historical accuracy with creativity and imagination. This information led the authors of this paper to conclude that historical literature about a previous pandemic could help students contextualize the disruptions and tragedies caused by COVID-19.

Collaborative Instructional Approach

Literature about active learning strategies (Bean, 2011; Bonwell & Eison, 1991) notes that inviting guest speakers can enhance student engagement in course material by promoting critical thinking and offering multiple perspectives (Merle & Craig, 2017). Another active learning strategy, writing-to-learn, which Bean (2011) attributes as a fundamental quality of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), involves meaningful writing-based activities that prompt students to critically engage with course content, in this case the historical connections between two pandemics: the 1918 flu pandemic and the COVID-19 pandemic. By writing to a specific audience, namely a guest speaker with expertise in infectious diseases, students participate in what is known as learner-centered discussion strategies (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). Moreover, many scholars have explored the complicated relationship between literary fiction, as well as other types of texts, and the cultivation of empathy among students (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Junker & Jacquemin, 2017). Other scholars discuss the connection between texts and empathy as a long-term

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and often delayed process by which readers learn from characters' situations depicted in the text (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). Therefore, facing anxiety about safety and myriad other uncertainties (such as when the COVID-19 pandemic would end or how bad it would get), talking about them in the classroom could provide the opportunity to learn lessons offered by historical works of fiction.

Most who taught or took classes during the COVID-19 pandemic's earliest stages in the United States contended with sudden and significant barriers to familiar classroom strategies. These circumstances required nimbleness on the part of instructors to deliver course material, and a flexibility on the part of students to adapt to new methodologies. When the authors met to plan the class meeting detailed in this paper, we had to acknowledge the context and limitations of the moment, including students' anxieties about COVID, as well as the lack of access to on-campus resources. The result was an experimental mix of teaching strategies both familiar and new; for example, both instructors had incorporated active learning strategies in their courses, such as inviting students to use writing as a form of discovery, but neither of us had offered a synchronous session in an otherwise asynchronous class, the latter approach of which admittedly lacks precedent in pedagogy literature. However, offering an optional forum for students to gather and engage live with their instructor and a guest expert seemed important in an otherwise isolating time. In June 2020, we, the authors of this paper, were not yet aware of trauma-informed and culturally responsive pedagogy (Sherwood et al., 2021) and could not claim to be employing it as a teaching strategy. Yet we were keenly aware of the "sudden restrictions from human contact" and "feelings of disconnectedness" (Sherwood et al., 2021, p. 101) that we—and likely the students—were experiencing. The lesson devised here is but one example of a teaching approach that could be adapted to respond to other, future disruptive events that instructors and students might face.

Social Ecological Model

The social ecological model (SEM) provides a framework for how various factors are interconnected in our society. SEM is frequently utilized in the field of public health, as it examines how the social determinants of health are interconnected and how they influence health behaviors at multiple levels (Brofenbrenner, 1979), including individual, interpersonal, community, and policy (Dahlberg & Krug, 2022). It helps to contextualize the environmental, social, and individual factors that impact health outcomes (Sallis & Owen, 2015). This model can be useful when coding qualitative data, such as written responses to student prompts, to identify and summarize what levels are of most concern and import across responses.

Existing research reveals how the SEM can be a useful model for identifying perceived risk factors for contracting COVID-19, as well as prevention behaviors among university students. Previous studies have found individual level factors to include personal protection from and concern about contracting the virus (Jang, 2022; Vilme et al., 2022). At the interpersonal level, protecting friends and family members from the virus, as well as information sharing, have been found to be important (Jang, 2022; Vilme et al., 2022). The community level of SEM has been related to how people perceive information and misinformation from the media as well, as community attitudes toward mask wearing and other protective measures (Jang, 2022; Vilme et al., 2022). At the policy level, themes related to COVID-19 include trust of governmental information sources and a lack of enforcement of protective measures (Jang, 2022; Vilme et al., 2022).

The purpose of this paper is to report on an interdisciplinary teaching collaboration that occurred during COVID-19, to identify key themes that emerged in student questions, and to demonstrate how fiction and interdisciplinary collaborations can be effective in the classroom generally and to facilitate conversation about difficult topics. This is important to get a better understanding of student concerns related to current events (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic) and to identify how a cross-disciplinary collaboration can be useful in situating emerging current events in historical contexts, so that students can see how history might repeat itself, perhaps helping them find stability during a difficult time. As a teaching case study, this paper reports on the framework of an interdisciplinary collaboration to enrich student discussion and reflection on the topic (Yin, 2014). This study was guided by the following research questions:

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1. How do students relate their own experiences during a pandemic when reading a work of historical fiction about life during a previous pandemic?
2. What are students' main concerns about the pandemic at the various levels of the SEM?

Methods

Class Design

DD structured the course based on Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) Understanding by Design model (also called Backwards Design), which situates learning objectives at the center of course design, with all assignments and class activities in service of those objectives. The assignment at the center of this paper sought to address the following two course objectives from the university's Humanities 200 common syllabus:

- Recognize appropriate contexts (such as genres, political perspectives, textual juxtapositions) and understand that readers may interpret literature from a variety of perspectives;

- Articulate a variety of examples of the ways in which literature gives us access to the human experience that reveals what differentiates it from, and connects it to, the other disciplines that make up the arc of human learning (James Madison University, n.d).

The class was scheduled as a 4-week asynchronous online class, a common format for the university's summer general education courses, and it also met the university's classification of "writing-infused," which states.

> Students will write a minimum of 5,000 words (approximately 15 pages double-spaced, standard font) in assignments that may include informal and formal, ungraded and graded forms. The extensive opportunity to produce and receive feedback on various genres of academic writing will help students sharpen their responses to interesting and thought-provoking texts and promote more engaged and sophisticated reading strategies. (James Madison University, n.d)

For this course, the online delivery was unrelated to pandemic conditions and was intentionally planned; however, the students had just concluded a disrupted semester, and pandemic considerations remained front-and-center in daily life at the time. DD, mindful of engaging students in course content, tried to make the assignments as approachable as possible. Including opportunities for students to meet writing requirements through informal, reflective approaches seemed important to the cultural moment.

Planning the Assignment and Preparing for the Class Meeting

Since this Humanities course had a focus on great works of literature, DD selected *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* as a relevant historical text to help students accomplish the learning objectives, specifically related to juxtaposing two human contexts, namely the 1918 flu and COVID-19 pandemics. DD asked a health sciences faculty member, SG, to participate, anticipating that students likely would have concerns that extended beyond literary considerations.

Together, we decided that if students composed questions directly to a guest lecturer in an interview-style format, they would meet a portion of the writing requirement in a low-stakes setting, while also engaging with multiple perspectives, as recommended by the active learning literature (Bean, 2011; Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Merle & Craig, 2017). Prior to the June 24, 2020 class session, during which SG guest-lectured and responded to the students' pre-written questions, DD introduced the concept of literary theory to provide students with discipline-specific terminology for approaching literary analysis. For the assignment in question, students were instructed to focus specifically on formalist theory, which concerns the textual elements such as plot, characterization, language, setting, and theme.

Also prior to the June 24 class, SG introduced DD to the SEM framework so that DD could also provide students with a brief SEM-related reading. This way, students were prepared ahead of time to engage with analytical frameworks in two different disciplines, namely literature and public health, which would encourage them to apply new lenses not only to *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, but also to their own lived experiences of a pandemic.

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Students were asked to read these materials and complete the writing assignment several days prior to SG's guest lecture, so that we could prepare an interview script containing the students' questions. DD compiled a de-identified list of student responses to all the prompts and shared them with SG. SG then organized the questions into themes to create an interview guide script with student questions and SG's answers. We wanted to use the scheduled time wisely, and to make sure that SG's presentation would address the pandemic-specific questions so that the students could benefit from an infectious disease expert's interpretation of Porter's novella, as a complement to DD's lessons focusing on literary frameworks.

The writing assignment itself instructed students to compose three questions, totaling 750 words, including interpretation, analysis, and their own ideas, and to write directly to SG, their guest lecturer. This paper focuses on two of the three prompts due to their connection between public health and the literature. The full assignment is in the Appendix.

One of the included prompts concerned literary formalism, i.e., the traditional method of close reading of a text. The Literary Analysis prompt instructions stated that responses *"should be about "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" and should include a quotation. Considering that we are asking an expert in infectious diseases to speak about this, I think it would be best to focus questions around the way the flu is depicted in the text".*

The second prompt focused on SEM. This prompt stated that responses: *"should be related to some aspect of the social-ecological model as it might apply to pandemic solutions—e.g., "what cultural norms might have to change to prevent another pandemic from occurring?"* This study was approved through James Madison University's Institutional Review Board, protocol #22-2759.

The Class Meeting

We followed principles of Universal Design to make content available synchronously and asynchronously, as well as in written and video/audio format for students with time constraints. During the live Zoom session, which was recorded, DD introduced SG, who presented a PowerPoint focusing on public health guidance conveyed during the two pandemics, and then answered student questions. After the session, DD posted the Zoom recording, PowerPoint slides, and interview transcript to the course Canvas site for students who were unable to attend the live session and/or who wanted additional access to the materials.

Data Analysis

Through a case study approach, this paper is focused on exploring the utility of fiction and interdisciplinary collaboration to understand student perspectives related to the COVID-19 pandemic using qualitative research methods (Yin, 2014). After the class meeting, DD compiled and sent SG a Word document including all de-identified student responses to the prompts. SG imported this document into NVivo 12 for thematic coding. The specific questions that students asked, including relevant text before or after the question, were coded using an integrative analysis which consisted of deductive codes shaped by the assignment prompt (e.g., level of the SEM), and inductive codes, which emerged during the coding process (e.g., differing health outcomes based on socioeconomic status) based on student questions and observations in their homework responses (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). For questions that did not easily fit into a category, both authors met to discuss the coding scheme until they reached consensus.

Results

Out of 18 students in the class, 16 responses were included in the analysis, as one student did not complete the assignment, and another did not enumerate their questions by prompt.

Literary Analysis Prompt

We identified five themes for the literary analysis prompt including portrayal of disease in the text, mental health during a pandemic, personal outcomes of disease, moving on from tragedy, and current events. A table of the codes, definitions, and sample quotation for the Literary Analysis Prompt can be found in Table 1.

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Table 1: Thematic Codes, Definitions, and Sample Quotes for Literary Analysis Prompt.

Code	Definition	Example Student Questions
Portrayal of disease	comparisons of 1918 flu and seasonal flu/1918 flu and COVID-19; how disease is depicted in text; safety precautions during 1918 flu	*....Have there been any instances in more modern days where someone suffering with the flu had similar symptoms to Miranda's?*
Mental health during a pandemic	focused beyond physical health and related to attitude, coping, and/or mental health generally (e.g., maintaining positivity)	*My question is about how infectious diseases deteriorate the mind during infection and if there are any lasting damages to someone's mental state after recovwery?*
Personal outcomes of disease	related to long-term individual outcomes (e.g., death, loss of smell)	*When people have infectious diseases like this or the coronavirus, which can cause a lot of pain and suffering, do they generally see death as a way to stop suffering like Miranda did or do they try to avoid death with whatever it takes?*
Moving on from tragedy	focused on what happens/how people can recover after a tragedy (e.g., pandemic, war) is over	*Could the aftermath of the Coronavirus be to the American population what it was to Miranda following the 1918 pandemic: an "empty" or "dead" and "cold" wasteland of a defeated people? How temporary might his effect be?*
Current events	focused on the role of news and political authorities; role of war in the story	*Since the 1918 flu pandemic was greatly influenced by the war through spreading, would it have still been as impactful a pandemic without the war?*

The most common themes that arose were portrayal of disease (n=5) and mental health during a pandemic (n=4). Questions about the portrayal of disease centered around comparisons between students' understanding of/experiences with seasonal flu and the novella's depiction of pandemic flu, as well as a comparison between the pandemic flu of 1918 and the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, one student wrote about the comparison of symptoms between the pandemic flu of 1918 and the seasonal flu that we know today:

> *Was this an accurate portrayal of symptoms of the 1918 influenza pandemic and how the disease progressed? How did the symptoms of today's flu evolve into more complex symptoms (headache, chills, fever, body aches, lack of delirium* [sic] *(when relating to the short story))?*

While usually mild with symptoms resolving on their own, seasonal flu is also known to have severe outcomes such as hospitalization and death, which the student may not have been aware of prior to the assignment or class meeting. Additionally, the student highlighted a perceived discrepancy between the endemic and relatively reliable nature of a seasonal illness, such as what the flu has become in the United States, and the uncertain outcomes and panic associated with a pandemic (i.e., 1918 flu, COVID-19). Due to the nature of this assignment, the student's question about the history and evolution of the flu and its symptoms were addressed in the guest lecture, which complemented the content of a traditional literature course.

Student questions related to mental health focused on attitudes toward the pandemic, coping with difficult emotions, and the quality of one's own mental health. For example, one student's question stated:

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Just as Miranda struggled to force a positive mentality during a trying time, many people living through the Coronavirus are feeling overwhelmed by its disruption of every aspect of their lives. Would you suggest that there is a healthier way to cope with these emotions, and if so, where does the balance lie between a positive attitude and a confrontation of our fears?

This question helped the student to contextualize the emotions, fears, and coping mechanisms that everyone experienced during June 2020. While the student wrote as a collective "many people, "it seems like the student, while seeking advice for balancing emotions and fears, actually was asking for advice for themselves and others around them during a time of uncertainty. In this assignment, students were able to write about the "collective" rather than only individual concerns, the latter of which might have been a greater focus had the instructors implemented survey questions or other types of direct engagement with students. Therefore, this particular assignment design helped students to reflect on and share their own experiences, and also respond in a way that they felt comfortable, perhaps by framing individual questions as ones that might also pertain to a larger population.

Three students' questions related to personal outcomes of disease that focused on long-term and permanent outcomes such as death. One of these stated:

She [Miranda] *begins to think that maybe death would have been better than having to remember all of the pain. Many veterans experience this. They witness such horrid events that they usually have PTSD. So, where does the fear of death really come from? What is its origin?*

This student considered the stress of surviving a pandemic similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition that many veterans of war encounter. The student questions why people are afraid of death when the emotional consequences of even surviving traumatic events can be daunting. Again, this prompt helped students to process their experiences during the pandemic beyond that of what likely would have been possible with a straightforward, individual-focused question.

The themes of moving on from tragedy and current events each had two related student questions. In contrast to the theme of personal outcomes described above, moving on from tragedy focused on how populations, rather than individuals, rebuild and recover from a traumatic event. The student quote below indicates how, on a population level, people can move on from war and illness: *"People are celebrating that the war is over, but there is still so much pain and grieving to be done, so how did people recover from all the loss and loneliness?"* Therefore, by relating this to their own experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, the student described their own concern about rebuilding relationships and overcoming isolation. This was similar to the other student quote in this theme, which focused on how long after the pandemic the effects would still be felt.

Student questions about current events mostly related to the context of each pandemic. One student's question, as described in Table 1, focused on the backdrop of World War I in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* and the 1918 flu, while another question focused on the spread of misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the latter, the student expressed concern about how political leaders might underplay or mislead the public about the severity of the disease. This question prompted a conversation during class about the similarities between the pandemics, and how President Wilson prioritized World War I over the pandemic.

Our president [Trump] called the virus a hoax and did not take the virus seriously enough which is why we are in the predicament that we are in. It's various news outlets that support trump [sic] and his gestures that belittle a world wide [sic] pandemic just to protect his image, and this is why I question literatures [sic] attempt to accurately describe some of the various stresses and grieving of the people.

During the class meeting, this student's response allowed us to explain more about the political context during the 1918 flu pandemic. SG explained how mask wearing was contentious and people rebelled against it then, as they were now. Additionally, comparing the political contexts provided some historical context for students and underscored how the human experience is shaped by many different and often conflicting views. By focusing on the comparison between the contexts of the

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two pandemics, the student was then able to make their own determination about the accuracy of the portrayal of the pandemic in the literature.

SEM Prompt

Fifteen student responses were coded for this prompt as one response did not include a question. The three themes that arose in the analysis of this prompt were in line with the levels of the SEM: the policy or society level was the most common code (n=9); followed by community level (n=6) and individual level (n=3). The codes, definition, and example student questions for the SEM prompt can be found in Table 2.

Table 2: Thematic Codes, Definitions, and Sample Quotes for SEM Prompt.

Code	Definition	Example Student Question
Individual level	Focused on what individuals can do to prevent disease	If prevention starts on an individual level, what are the first steps to improve our behaviors and beliefs in a manner that encourages prevention?
Community level	Focused on what communities (e.g., universities) can do to prevent disease including enforcement of rules (e.g., masking, physical distancing), concerns about returning to/being on campus	To add on to my question, how might we enforce the changes to protect our communities and ourselves from another pandemic?
Society/Political level	Focused on how society will change after the pandemic (e.g., stop handshakes) or how messages can be sent/laws enforced to prevent disease	How do you morally and ethically and logically balance economics and public safety during a pandemic?

At the policy level, student questions related to how society might change because of the pandemic, as well as how authorities can enforce mandates related to disease prevention measures (e.g., mask wearing, social distancing). One student asked, *"my question is how will we create a climate that makes the people want to comply with guidelines for the safety of the country while allowing them to have their voices heard and bring the country together?"* Another question focused on societal practices, indicating how greetings such as handshakes have stopped during the pandemic. Here, the student wondered how such societal norms may change in the future. *"With the pandemic going on, we have halted our handshakes. Do you think we will go back to opening a conversation with them, or will we simply nod our heads as a greeting?"* This student was concerned about how greetings and social norms could permanently change due to concern about infectious disease and contagion. As so many aspects of "normal" life were upended at this point in time, and there was so much uncertainty about disease transmission and when activities could return to "normal," there was speculation (and concern) about the permanency of the ways in which students' lives had been changed to date.

Concerns about the safety and well-being of marginalized populations arose at the policy/society level. As many marginalized groups were – and continue to be – disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, this was an important question: *"What steps can we take in looking after marginalized groups of people, low-income families, and the homeless population in a global pandemic? How can this be implemented into smaller cities, towns, and areas globally?"* During the height of the pandemic, marginalized people and people experiencing homelessness were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and had a higher risk of contracting the disease. Many essential employees in hourly positions were required to report to work and interact with the public, which put them at increased risk for COVID-19. Individuals experiencing homelessness were also at increased risk of COVID-19 due to the social nature of shelters. Therefore, we were able to include a brief discussion about how and why some populations experience greater burdens of disease than others during the class meeting.

At the community level, questions focused on keeping goods (e.g., toilet paper) in stock, as well as enforcing mask wearing and other preventative measures on campus and in communities. As data collection took place in June 2020, questions in response to this prompt

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were reflective of that time, as concerns about supply chain shortages were just starting, and students were uncertain about what the fall 2020 semester would look like. For example, a common question that arose in this theme related to how universities would respond to the pandemic in the fall semester. One student commented, *"[D]o you think all students will actually be wearing masks and to what point do you think the schools are going to enforce social distancing?"*

Student questions at the individual level focused on how individuals could prevent infectious diseases such as the flu and COVID-19. In the example below, the student was questioning how people could take responsibility to prevent disease to curb the spread of COVID-19: *"So, a follow up question would be how might we inspire people to take responsibility and adhere to social distancing guidelines, mask wearing, and any other policies that may arise?"* While this question includes information about policies and their enforcement, its focus is more about how individuals could be compelled to engage in preventative measures, such as mask wearing.

While most student questions (n=12) addressed distinct levels of SEM, the layers of SEM often interact with each other. Three student responses made connections between different levels of the SEM: one included questions at both the individual and community levels, one at the individual and policy levels, and one at the community and policy levels. No students addressed the interpersonal level of the SEM.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify how an interdisciplinary collaboration can utilize a work of fiction to highlight student concerns related COVID-19 so that they can be addressed in the classroom. Historical fiction, such as *Pale Horse, Pale Rider,* can help students access and articulate their thoughts about current events, in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic. The assignment described in this paper revealed that students had a range of concerns including mental health, personal health-related outcomes, and how to move on from the pandemic. While students are expected to engage with a literary text in a humanities course, preparing questions based on personal reflection for an expert in the field serves as an additional tool to help students better understand their own experiences and the course material. This was evidenced as students asked questions related to their own experiences (e.g., how students would be protected from COVID-19 in the fall semester) rather than just the text itself. Additionally, integrating current events and a historical text allowed students to critically reflect on the themes present in the text that also were relevant to their current circumstances (e.g., students noticed that the characters in the novella took almost no precautions to avoid contracting the flu, an observation that may have echoed students' concerns – at the time of the class meeting – about protecting themselves and their loved ones from COVID-19).

Due to the fluid and ongoing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems logical that these concerns and interests will change over time. However, the literary text lends some stability to such conversations, in contrast to the constant and oftentimes confusing flux presented by news stories, commentaries, and public health guidance. In particular, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* provides a window into aspects of the human experience, such as living through a pandemic, that will seem remarkably familiar to contemporary readers, while at the same time allowing students to analyze a fictional text, which offers a welcomed remove from some of the most contentious politicized discourse of the moment. Future research might explore how student reactions to *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, as well as how concerns at the various levels of SEM, change over the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, during a period when masking is optional in most public settings in the United States, perhaps there would be a difference in student perceptions of the novella, or perhaps the tendency might be to focus on different aspects of SEM than were prominent in June 2020 student responses. Comparing and contrasting student responses at two points in the pandemic could provide insight into how instructors might handle future disruptive events. Additional research also could be conducted to assess students' engagement with the SEM in disciplines other than public health, literature, and the humanities. For example, a political science lesson might pair SEM with a current or historical text about reproductive rights in the United States, prompting students to analyze factors that contribute to attitudes toward this issue, as well as to reflect on potential outcomes of new legislation or policies.

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Using a work of historical fiction also was helpful in mitigating potentially divisive topics, such as mask-wearing and other public health measures that had become politicized at the time. Although no disagreements arose during the class meeting, such disputes had the potential to occur due to the proximity of a contentious election in the United States, as well as rhetoric that contributed to misinformation about public health measures. Students' own observations and reflections served as a way to consider the political context of the current pandemic and what narratives might become memorialized in a work of fiction related to COVID-19. By comparing the rhetoric of leaders during the 1918 flu pandemic with those in office during COVID-19, students also learned that the contemporary political strife they were experiencing was not unprecedented, but that it was analogous to situations from a century ago. Using a text of historical fiction in the classroom as a lens for an interdisciplinary collaboration can help address any number of difficult topics that persist in United States' society and could be useful for defusing tension but also fostering meaningful discussion. For example, public health and communications faculty could collaborate to discuss the portrayal of monkey pox in the news, or a collaboration between law and biology faculty could focus on the implications of providing genetic data to companies such as 23andme.

A student concern that arose from the assignment was how the pandemic has disproportionately impacted marginalized populations. For example, wage employees were required to be physically present at work during the height of the pandemic and were not compensated for sick time, even if they were infected during their shift. In addition to increased health risks they faced, they also lost income if they became ill and could not work. Employees, such as those in hospitality and service industries, were hit particularly hard by the economic impacts of COVID-19 (Gould & Kassa, 2021). Marginalized populations, in general, also have more trouble accessing the health care system and paying for bills. While the student question focused on how, on a societal level, we can help marginalized populations, this is also something that should be considered in classrooms. During the 2020-2021 academic year, which was predominately online for our university, many students who were living in rural areas encountered challenges to internet access, as well as having a reliable device to take exams and complete assignments.

There were no student questions that addressed the interpersonal level of the SEM, which could have been related to protecting family and friends from COVID-19 or talking with them about the virus of SEM. However, most of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* is focused on interpersonal communication, namely that between Miranda and her lover, Adam, as well as other exchanges between the characters. There were several possible interpretations for this result, one of which concerns logistics: the class was online and asynchronous, scheduled during the summer 2020, following a partially remote spring term. As such, students may have still been in "lockdown" mode, with few current or recent interpersonal experiences on their minds. A class held in the fall of 2020 or later might have revealed more student questions at the interpersonal level related to pressures of mask-wearing, concerns about seeing family members or friends with differing ideas of pandemic safety, worries about being physically present in the classroom, as well as conflicting perceptions of vaccination. In June 2020, it is possible that students' inner circles of friends and family consisted of mostly like-minded people, which offers another explanation for why this group expressed few ideas about interpersonal behaviors. Using SEM allows instructors to help students think through challenging topics and prompts students to examine problems through a variety of different perspectives.

Understanding student concerns through a writing-infused assignment such as this can help instructors identify barriers that students encounter so they can be addressed in the classroom. By allowing students to reflect on their own experiences in the context of historical fiction, students were able to achieve course objectives and have a richer understanding of their current context related to understanding a broader and more nuanced political context, understanding how and why different populations are disproportionately impacted. From an instructors' perspective, students' immediate concerns and preoccupations were more evident, which helped us to better understand how students were navigating the pandemic.

Using the Past to Inform the Future *continued*

Limitations

While our study highlights how the use of fiction and writing-infused assignments can help students reflect on their own experience of current events (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic), there were some limitations to this study. First, this assignment was conducted during June 2020, a time when most universities were fully online, and the public generally agreed that it was important to take safety precautions to limit the spread of disease. With attitudes about virus mitigations such as mask-wearing and vaccination becoming more polarized and politicized later in 2020, students may have responded differently to the assignment prompts had the assignment been given in fall 2020 or later. Perhaps future research could replicate this assignment to see how the responses have changed over time, especially now that students have returned to in-person classes and masking and other preventative measures are not required in most places. This study also included a small sample size, and as qualitative research, cannot be generalized to a larger population of students. Students in this class were self-selected into an online course, the content of which focused on racial justice and disability awareness among other topics, so these students may have been more aware of the pandemic's consequences to vulnerable populations, and/or more risk averse themselves, than other students might have been. Future studies could focus on students in other classes or majors, who may be less interested in mask-wearing and vaccination. A final limitation was that due to the intensive nature of the 3-credit course over a 4-week period, students had only four days to read the novella and submit their interview questions; in a semester-long course, students would have been given more time to read and complete the written assignment.

Conclusion

It is common knowledge that eliciting feedback from students can be useful to understand not only how coursework is progressing, but also the predominant student concerns. With particularly sensitive issues, such as a pandemic, that are potentially traumatic to those living through them it, using fiction to highlight the historical context of characters may help students access their own experiences while also connecting them to the arc of human history. Other methods, such as direct survey questions, do not accomplish the same humanistic connections, as they lack context. Depending on course content, learning objectives, and instructor preferences, there may not be an opportunity to address such difficult topics in every class, but when a relevant opportunity to do so presents itself, integrating content-based activities that encourage reflection on lived experiences can offer insights into student perceptions and experiences. Future research could explore ways that this type of activity could be implemented in other classes and disciplines. Ultimately, this can also be useful for helping instructors inspire students to move on and continue to be motivated, even if their college experience may not be what they expected or what is considered normal. As information about COVID-19 continues to shift in real time, a work of fiction that provides an enduring snapshot of life during a pandemic serves as a way for students and instructors to engage with their own uncertain daily realities. We anticipate that *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* can continue to have instructional value in the months and even years to come in helping students in many disciplines to make sense of the long-lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic by placing it in a historical context.

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Appendix: Assignment Instructions for Students

You are writing a total of three developed questions, totaling 750 words. Each question ought to be framed with some interpretation/analysis/ideas of your own. You will earn +5 on this assignment if you submit your questions by 5 pm M 6/22 (so that I can give them to RC ahead of time).

Prompt 1 [literary analysis prompt] should be about "*Pale Horse, Pale Rider*" and should include a quotation. [Note: I want to keep this as flexible as possible, but you could find it helpful to refer to the documents in Week 1 that give you language for discussing texts from a formalist perspective--i.e., theme, POV, characterization, etc]. Considering that we are asking an expert in infectious diseases to speak about this, I think it would be best to focus questions around the way the flu is depicted in the text.

Prompt 2 [not included in analysis] should be related to the 1918 flu pandemic and/or the coronavirus pandemic--not necessarily related to "Pale Horse," but more pertaining to the CDC documents.

Prompt 3 [SEM prompt] should be related to some aspect of the social-ecological model as it might apply to pandemic solutions—e.g., "what cultural norms might have to change to prevent another pandemic from occurring?"