Coffee Over Zoom:
Teaching Food Studies Over the Internet During a Pandemic

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Abstract: This essay details the process of transitioning an in-person, undergraduate honors seminar on the global coffee trade to an online course as a result of the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Due to the course's demand for physical proximity, specific challenges emerged involving course design and active learning. This essay considers the problem-solving process and ultimate strategies for remotely teaching, discussing, and experiencing the global coffee trade. Specifically, this essay examines how YouTube and Zoom became important pedagogical tools for reimagining experiential learning and creating meaningful human connections.

Keywords: coffee, coronavirus disease, COVID-19, online teaching, honors seminar, YouTube, Zoom.

How do you taste "hints of blueberry" over the internet? This was one of the many bizarre questions I found myself asking on March 10, 2020. For the previous eight weeks, my "Black Gold: Coffee, Culture, and Global Exchange" course, an interdisciplinary undergraduate honors seminar, had carefully considered the global coffee trade from a number of food studies, human rights, and international trade angles. My core objective with the class was to inspire conscious, active consumers—students who think about where their products come from and purchase accordingly. As a result, we had spent a lot of time examining the inequality, exploitation, and human suffering that defines the global coffee trade. We had also devoted much of our time to exploring the experiential aspects of coffee. We tried a range of specialty and direct-trade coffees. We experimented with different brewing techniques. We even visited a local coffee shop to learn more about the role of coffee in our own community. In the coming weeks, we were scheduled to travel to a roastery to experience a full-scale "cupping" (the international spoon-slurping method for assessing coffee quality). And then COVID-19 arrived.

At once, much of our course became impossible. Just like my colleagues, I had about two weeks to figure out how to transition an in-progress, fully functioning, and thoroughly enjoyable in-person class into an approximate (or at least working) online version of itself. But how does one do this when so much of the class requires immediate physical proximity? For example, how do you give students the firsthand opportunity to brew coffee with a Chemex when they do not have the proper equipment or even access to coffee? How do you teach students to taste those hints of blueberry or toffee or flowers when you are in totally different spaces and separated by time zones? Or more basically, how does one facilitate natural, coffee-inspired conversation when everyone is reduced to a two-inch square on a screen?

In the essay that follows, I discuss how I used various forms of technology to meet these urgent teaching needs and challenges. However, as I explain, the transition online did not reveal any new or groundbreaking technological solutions to my larger questions. Rather, by way of technology, my class became something different and, in the end, more meaningful.

Teaching Coffee: The Original Plan

Before I describe how our class transitioned online, I should first offer more detail about the course itself and where we started. "Black Gold: Coffee, Culture, and Global Exchange" is a 200-level honors seminar taught at a flagship, research university. The course begins with an extensive history of coffee, where students learn about the beverage's origins (both actual and mythical), its migration around the world by way of colonialism, wars, and trade, and its most recent explosion in global popularity. In the United States, coffee first gained "everyday" status as commodity coffee (think: Folgers in the cannister) and later as specialty coffee (think: Starbucks and later smaller craft roasters). We then explore the science and botany of coffee, where students learn the species of coffee (*arabica* and *robusta*), the basics of how coffee grows (the beans are actually cherries harvested from disease-prone, slow-growing plants in equatorial regions), and how underpaid laborers must then pick, wash, dry, and process the beans before they can be sold. Eventually, we examine the economics of coffee (often referred to as the second most widely legally traded global commodity, behind only oil), its supply chain (coffee typically passes through nine sets of "hands" between harvest and your drive-thru cup), and the ethics of certifications (direct trade, fair trade, etc.). Our discussions of coffee's history, science, and economics draw on readings from Thurston (2018), Hoffmann (2018), and Pendergrast (2019).

When students have a handle on this foundational knowledge, we turn our attention to specific national contexts (Ethiopia, Yemen, Vietnam, Jamaica, Guatemala, Colombia, and Hawaii in the United States) and examine the lives of those who grow and produce coffee. Our texts are primarily documentaries such as *Black Gold* (Francis and Francis, 2006), *A Film About Coffee* (Loper, 2014), *Connected by Coffee* (Dennis, 2014), and *The Coffee Man* (Hann, 2016), and students also read Dave Eggers's literary nonfiction work *The Monk of Mokha* (2018). The ultimate goal of the class is for students to understand how their seemingly innocuous purchases—in this case coffee, but by extension almost any product they buy—impact countless lives and communities around the world. Our class members have the choice, then, either to use this power responsibly to improve the lives of those who struggle, or to reinforce oppressive and exploitative systems.

Student participation is critical to our course. The class typically enrolls about 20 students, who come from a range of majors, class standings, and cultural backgrounds. (During the spring of 2020, our seminar comprised ten seniors, seven juniors, and three sophomores. Their majors included animal behavior, biochemistry, business analytics, earth science, epidemiology, finance, human biology, journalism, management, marketing, political science, public health/community health, sociology, and Spanish.) Our class is discussion-driven, and each student is required to actively participate. This happens in a number of ways. Beginning the second week of the semester, each student takes a turn opening a class meeting with a CARS ("Coffee Article Review and Summary") presentation. During these five-minute talks, students introduce a recent popular or academic article on any coffee-related topic of their choosing. Past CARS presentations have focused on the effects of caffeine on the brain, the role of coffee shops in rehabilitating previously incarcerated men, and the innovative use of IBM Blockchain to track coffee from plant to cup.

Later in the semester, students are placed in teams of three and asked to collaborate on a 20-minute "Country Analysis Presentation." The idea here is for each team to do a contextual deep dive on one of the coffee-producing geographies featured in our films. Around midterm, students participate in a judged debate, taking sides as to whether or not Starbucks is an ethical company. And for their end-of-the-semester project, each student visits a local coffee shop and drafts a five-page, ethnographic-style essay based on a one-hour observation. During our final classes, students share their analysis, which is informed by all of the coffee-specific knowledge (varieties of coffee, sourcing, consumers, labor, community, marketing, etc.) they have gained over the course of the semester.

While this applied learning allows us to build the class together, students also have hands-on opportunities to brew and drink coffee. These experiences prove to be highlights of our seminar. During one of our first classes, we review an extensive coffee menu, and students learn the origins and components of familiar drinks (e.g., latte, cappuccino, macchiato). Then, we actually brew coffee in our classroom. About once per week, we attempt a new method. One class period involves trying out an Aeropress. In another, a Chemex. Then a French press. We brew pour overs, cold brew, nitro cold brew, and even drip. (Many of my students have never seen a drip coffee maker before!) As we test the fruits of our labor, we talk about how to drink coffee (let it cool off), what we taste in our coffee (we use an elaborate flavor wheel), and most importantly, where our coffee comes from. We also visit local coffee shops, where we try more coffee, and have guest speakers, who bring us their coffee. All of this builds toward our eventual trip to a local roastery, where students observe coffee beans being roasted and take part in a cupping, which involves using a spoon to slurp and assess a variety of freshly steeped coffees. Frequently, our visits to the roastery have occurred on beautiful spring days, when the roastery's garage door is pulled opened and students cap off our visit by sitting outside and enjoying one of the shop's many delicious drinks.

During the spring of 2020, we never made it to the roastery. In fact, we barely made it to the semester's halfway point. On March 10, the president of our university announced "urgent, proactive steps" (McRobbie, email, March 10, 2020) to combat COVID-19. All face-to-face teaching would be suspended, and all students were encouraged to return home. This news was both alarming and saddening. Our coffee seminar had been one of the best classes of my 16-year teaching career. My students had been exceptionally committed to our work, and we were progressing with a sense of purpose. Now we would go away for two weeks (spring break had been extended by a week), and upon our "return," our class would be something else.

Technology as Pedagogical Strategy for Reinvention and Catharsis

When our university went online, my impulse was to try to virtually replicate as much of my in-person course as possible. I had no experience teaching online, and I recognized that trying to develop a truly online course (as opposed to a course taught over the internet) would be foolish. So, I spent the first week of spring break trying to determine remote versions of our activities. For example, I normally screen our documentaries in class. However, now that our seminar would be held over the video conferencing platform Zoom (which I had used only about a dozen times prior for meetings), how would I show these films? Would I livestream them? After many phone calls and emails with my tech-savvy colleagues, this proved unworkable. But if I assigned students to watch our films on their own, I ran into other problems. Our library's digital specialist was overwhelmed and would not be able to transfer our documentaries as quickly as needed. Therefore, students would have to rent the films, hence incurring unexpected costs. But in two instances, even this latter problem became moot, as our films were obscure and unavailable on streaming platforms. As a result, I ended up dropping films, adding films, and searching out every possible way—including encouraging students to sign up for free trials of streaming services—in order for students to sidestep rental fees.

Ultimately, I had to give up on most of my in-person-to-online migration strategy. After extensive deliberation and much creative problem solving, I concluded that at least 60% of our remaining course activities would be impossible (or nearly impossible), especially given our short transition timeframe. We could not visit a roastery. (Post-COVID, could you imagine students packed around a table, slurping coffee from the same cups?!) I could not determine an easy way for students to practice brewing methods. Nor could I figure out how we could try specific coffees (short of having the coffee sent to the students, which would be cost-prohibitive and reliant upon students having

access to brewing equipment.) Even our Starbucks debate, as I had originally imagined, became a far more complicated proposition. Therefore, I now had a lot of open time on our syllabus.

One option would be for me to assign more readings or films. Another possibility would be to simulate our intended activities online—for example, show students videos about the roasting process; show me brewing a cup of coffee with a French press. But students had already read about many of these processes and watched demonstrations. The application—or what the students might call "the real thing"—was what we were all looking forward to.

I decided to try something new. Rather than overloading the course with more of my own content, I would invite students to play an active role in reimagining the course. After all, the students were now at the point where they knew coffee beyond its basics, and some of the most impactful moments of the semester had already resulted from their contributions. How could we now use the technology available to us to continue to learn and connect in meaningful ways?

We would make two major interventions. First, each student would be asked to give a YouTube presentation. The idea was simple but used video-sharing technology that everyone had available. Every class member would search YouTube for a compelling coffee-related video connecting to their own interests. Then, on designated days (generally about one class per week), we would have four or five students present their videos to the seminar. In hindsight, the mechanics of this activity reflect how incrementally we were learning to use necessary technology. The night before a presentation, students would email me their YouTube link, which gave me a chance to watch the video in advance. Then, once we were all on Zoom the next day, I would paste the link into our chat. If the student's video was five minutes or shorter, we would all turn off our "faces" and watch the video in a separate browser. (By fortunate happenstance, all of my students were able to continue to attend class synchronously, even if they were not in the United States.) If a student's chosen video was longer than five minutes, I would ask them to direct us to a five-minute segment. Once everyone had watched the video, we would reactivate our cameras, and the presenting student would analyze what we had just watched. Then as a group, we would have a conversation about the YouTube video.

The results surprised me. I expected that students would find engaging videos—some heavy, some quirky—on a range of subjects. Yet, I was struck by how many students chose videos, without my guidance, that responded directly or indirectly to the pandemic. One student selected a video introducing our class to dalgona coffee, which was an internet sensation during the initial lockdown period. Referred to as the "quarantine drink," dalgona is a pretty gross concoction, made by whipping instant coffee, sugar, and hot water into a cream, which is then covered by milk. Yet, the beverage had become popular because of its excessively long whipping period (no one had anything else to do) and the fact that it was made from everyday household ingredients. Another student chose a survivalist video demonstrating how to make an entire breakfast using only a drip coffee maker. And then there were other students who chose coffee-related videos foregrounding compassion. One particularly memorable video featured a South Carolina coffee shop run and operated by people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

As we discussed these videos, I could feel our emotions in new ways. Although we had spent a couple of months discussing all kinds of human suffering—starvation, child labor, genocide—this pain had remained relatively abstract. Now as we spoke, everyone was dealing with difficulty. Most of our class members had left our town immediately, and many were now crammed back at home in their childhood bedrooms. Illness and death seemed to be the talk of everyone, everywhere. My own mother, a lifelong educator, passed away on a Tuesday morning in April just hours before one of our scheduled class meetings. And with each week, more of life seemed to slip away. Our class would not meet again in person. Spring sports were cancelled. Summer internships and study abroad went away. Seniors in our class would not have a graduation. Students would not be able to say a range of goodbyes.

Therefore, our class discussions became meaningful, if not altogether rare, moments for human connection. Class members repeatedly told me how much they looked forward to class. (Many of their other courses had understandably become asynchronous, leaving students to basically spend their days watching video lectures.) In our seminar, we could actually talk to one another, and students would routinely stay on Zoom to chat even after class had ended. So, when we discussed our YouTube videos, we were usually doing much more than just analyzing whatever we saw on screen. Sometimes we were trying to process the moment (we said, "when things get back to normal…" a lot). In other instances, our videos made us laugh. And other times—such as when one student shared a performance-art video showcasing breakdancing in a coffee shop—these clips were distractions from the uncertainty surrounding us.

The second major intervention involved our final project. Students could no longer visit local shops to complete their observations. In addition to safety concerns, the coffee shops in our town were actually closed. As a result, I adjusted our assignment from a "Coffee Shop Analysis" to a "Coffee Company Analysis," where students would now select a coffee company and visit its website rather than its brick-and-mortar establishment. (I chose "company" in the title because I wanted students to feel free to analyze the online presence of a farm, co-op, distributor, roastery, etc., rather than just a coffee shop's website, which they were still welcome to do.)

Again, from a technological perspective, this was not revolutionary. We were simply using the internet to facilitate our learning in a new way. My expectation was that students would devote much of their analysis to examining branding, products, and the website's user experience. And students generally covered all of this. And yet again, without my direction, these undergraduates expanded the assignment to also think more deeply about our current moment.

Almost every student mentioned COVID-19 in their essay. Unlike in past semesters, when students wrote about the same half-dozen shops, this semester we were introduced to a sampling of coffee establishments across North America. In Duluth, Minnesota. San Diego. New York City. Oakville, Ontario. Durham, North Carolina. Oahu, Hawaii. As we considered each location, we gained insight into how small businesses were responding to the pandemic. Some coffee shops had temporarily closed down. Others were only fulfilling mobile or curbside orders. Some were offering free local delivery. Others were now selling beans only online. Some had taken to selling oversized 5-lb. bags of beans or half-gallon-sized containers of cold brew for customers who were stocking up. Others were offering coupon codes ("STAYWELL" for 20% off at one Atlanta shop). Some were appealing to customers to purchase gift cards to keep from having to lay off baristas. One Indianapolis shop created an online "Customer Financed Support Fund" to help employees. Other companies were providing free coffee for front-line medical workers. In real time, we were charting how one industry was responding to a singular global crisis. And as students presented over Zoom, the rest of the class was able to simultaneously visit the websites and do their own instant analysis, which richened our discussion. Although this was not the final assignment I had originally planned, this new version allowed for all kinds of analysis that I could never have imagined.

In addition to the design and redesign of these two assignments, other aspects of our class were productively shaped by our new technological setup. Students reported that they were watching our films for class with their parents, and their families were having some of the same discussions we were having in our seminar. Students began to reach out to me for advice on purchasing grinders and brewing devices for their homes. And though we had lost a certain intimacy by going online, we had gained another intimacy as we were now virtually entering each other's living spaces two mornings per week. If students were now unable to partake in the coffee that I had planned for us to try, they were arriving to class with their own mugs and drinks of choice.

Conclusion

Once COVID-19 diminishes, I hope I never have to teach through a pandemic again. With this said, technology—even of the "everyday" sort like YouTube—made continuing to teach possible in a way that would have been unthinkable when I was in college just over 20 years ago. During the span of two months, I learned, experimented, and reflected more on my teaching than ever before. And while we all would have preferred to have remained in the classroom, I would argue that our transition online made our class more meaningful. Though I never officially polled my students, I would bet that they, like me, developed a new gratitude for the opportunity to come to each and every class. The work that we did had a newfound purpose, and students demonstrated an awareness for the struggles of others—remember, this was my original core course objective—to an extent that I have never before witnessed as an instructor. In her poem "Paul Robeson," the great Gwendolyn Brooks wrote, "we are each other's/harvest:/we are each other's/business:/we are each other's magnitude and bond" (2005, p. 113). Although Brooks wrote these lines in a different context, her poem accurately represents where I feel our class concluded at the end of a course on coffee taught during a pandemic over Zoom.

Acknowledgment

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