

# Teaching Mutual Aid in First-Year Writing

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## Abstract

*In this article, I chart my efforts in teaching a first-year writing class centered around mutual aid at a predominantly white institution. After contextualizing mutual aid and explaining my local institutional context, I describe the course I taught, "Rhetorics and Literacies of Mutual Aid." In particular, I detail the Mini Solidarity Campaign, one major assignment that asks students to work collaboratively as an entire class to engage a campus issue in their lives. After doing so, I conclude by reflecting on the limits and challenges of doing mutual aid work in mainstream educational settings.*

Last spring, I tweeted a Twitter thread about my experiences teaching a first-year writing course titled "Rhetorics and Literacies of Mutual Aid" at my home institution. I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to revise and remediate those thoughts into this more traditional reflection. Here, then, I offer a comprehensive description of the class, take stock of what seemed to work well and

what didn't, and meditate on the challenges of building radical theory and praxis into normative institutional contexts.

## What is Mutual Aid

Before launching into what I taught and how I taught it, I'll first provide a brief overview of mutual aid and my own relationship to it. According to scholar-activist Dean Spade (2020), mutual aid constitutes "collective coordination to meet each other's needs," the likes of which stems from the inability for our existing social structures to do so (7). As an "inherently anti-authoritarian" set of practices (16), mutual aid not only rejects those charity models of social services often deployed by local governments and non-profits (21), but actively engenders solidarity, movement building, and horizontal decision-making among those most impacted by interlocking oppressions (12). Such projects can take many forms—childcare, food distribution, clothing or supply drives, free legal aid, and much more—so long as they are enacted in the participatory radical spirit of mutual aid.

For many, the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the rot of U.S. infrastructure, itself in a state of disrepair for decades. As state responses to intertwined crises of healthcare, housing, poverty, climate change, mass incarceration, and immigration ranged from inadequate to non-existent, community members turned to mutual aid to provide care and material resources to—and for—each other. To be clear, however, mutual aid did not begin with the tides of the pandemic. Though the term originated in the work of anarchist writer Peter Kropotkin, Black and Indigenous communities have been enacting radical community-oriented survival projects for centuries, borne in response to the ongoing violences of colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy (Ervin 2021, Indigenous Mutual Aid 2021, Maynard and Simpson 2022).

I was a graduate student when COVID-19 hit. Like many universities, mine not only did little to protect workers across campus from infection, disability, and death (Birchmier et al. 2021), but senior administration sought to impose the technological costs of remote instruction—webcams, mics, and other work-from-home accommodations—on grads, many of whom were making less than living wages (Graduate Employees' Organization at UIUC 2020). In response, not only did our graduate union mobilize against these administrative impositions, but we developed a mutual aid working group to ensure that workers across campus had what they needed to protect themselves and others. We developed protocols for distributing masks and hand sanitizer to those in our communities and established a mutual aid solidarity fund that, over the course of its existence, raised over \$6,000 to redistribute to campus workers. These efforts, in turn, helped cultivate strong soil for additional mutual aid efforts to thrive. Members of our graduate union and our sister organizing group Defund UIPD (University of Illinois Police Department) took on projects to stock local pop-up community fridges (whose food and supplies were freely accessible to anyone), as well circulate PPE and supplies to unhoused communities in our area.

These experiences were transformational for me insofar as they demonstrated how everyday people could come together and organize to meet each other's material needs amidst crisis. We built our own systems for taking care of each other because the state and the university failed to do so. In doing so, we felt strong together.

## **Mutual Aid at a PWI?: Institutional Context**

Given these experiences, I had known for some time through the pandemic that I wanted to teach a university course built around

theories and praxes of mutual aid. It wasn't until Winter 2023 that I was able to do so, when I taught "Rhetorics and Literacies of Mutual Aid" as part of the University of Denver's (DU) two-course, first-year writing sequence. It was my first term teaching at DU, where I started working in September of the previous year. Because I was new to the institution, I wasn't quite sure what to expect with this class. What would the students be like? How receptive would folks be to the content and structure of the course? I also wasn't sure to what extent what I wanted to teach would align with the aims and goals of my program's first-year writing initiative (more on that below). All of these uncertainties were compounded by the fact that I hadn't served as an instructor of record for four years, on account of my previous graduate and faculty positions requiring me to take on more administrative and writing center-focused roles.

Before I get too far into the weeds of my class, I'll sketch out a bit of context around the University of Denver, which I think is especially crucial for understanding how the course unfolded. DU is a private R1 university serving both graduate and undergraduate students. As a predominantly white institution (PWI), DU has an undergraduate population that is nearly 70% white (National Center for Education Statistics 2023). So too do many of the institution's undergraduates come from affluent families. Although DU offers scholarships and financial aid packages to incoming students, the yearly cost of attendance for a full-time undergraduate living on campus is currently over \$80,000 (University of Denver 2023).

I currently work a Teaching Assistant Professor in DU's University Writing Program. The primary charge of the 30-plus instructors in our unit, primarily comprised of non-tenure track instructors, is to teach the two-course, first-year writing sequence: WRIT 1122: "Rhetoric and Academic Writing," and WRIT 1133: "Writing and

Research.” I taught “Rhetorics and Literacies of Mutual Aid” as a WRIT 1122 class. While faculty are required to teach these classes in accordance with standardized course goals—among them, composing texts for varied rhetorical situations and conducting primary research through a range of methodological traditions—they are welcome to structure and/or theme their sections of 1122 and 1133 however they see fit. Some instructors build their courses around topics such as board games or AI while others focus their curricula on frameworks for wellness or disability justice. Regardless of content, each section of WRIT 1122 and WRIT 1133, consisting of around 16-17 students, unfolds at a fast clip. Because DU runs on a quarter system, the academic year is split into three distinct quarters—Fall, Winter, and Spring—and so each course lasts only ten weeks. Needless to say, it felt as if there was not much time to teach rhetoric, academic writing, or research, much less anything of substance relating to mutual aid.

## Course Description

Roughly speaking, I divided “Rhetorics and Literacies of Mutual Aid” into two sections: theory and praxis. In the first half of the quarter, we explored rhetoric through the lens of Jay Dolmage's definition: “Rhetoric [is] the strategic study of the circulation of power through communication” (Agnew et al. 2021, 113). We took an expansive view of literacy as well, understanding it as situated acts of meaning-making writ large (Pritchard 2012, Davis 2019). To that end, students wrote a rhetoric and power analysis for their first major assignment, which asked them to trace power, rhetoric, accountability, story, and relationality in one of three assigned texts whose undergirding ideas pertained to abolition (Kaba 2021), Indigenous knowledge and anti-colonial practices (Kimmerer 2013), or disability justice (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). The idea for this assignment was both to complicate western and neo-Aristotelian

rhetorical traditions and to set students up for more in-depth discussions of mutual aid later in the term. My thinking was that if students gained practice in tracing the circulation of power through texts of their (constrained) choosing, they would be more primed to understand how power operates through real-life interactions in local contexts.

The second half of the quarter was more explicitly devoted to reading about, writing about, and trying to “do” a version of mutual aid by examining its politics, histories, and structures. As historical case studies of mutual aid, we read about the Black Panthers (Nelson 2013); Young Lords (Enck-Wanzer 2010); and the Umoja Village Shantytown, which was collectively built in response to housing crises in Miami (Rameau 2012).<sup>1</sup> Afterward, students made collaborative posters in class based on each organizing effort with creative insightful notes on how each group or campaign approached mutual aid work. In addition, Spade’s (2020) work was crucial throughout the quarter, both for its utility in parsing distinctions between community care and charity models for aid as well as providing very practical tools for organizing: running meetings, dividing labor, and navigating burnout. In particular, our readings and discussions around the functions of charity—which serves to preserve the status quo through paternalism, reform, and profits for the rich (22-23)—were especially eye-opening to many students in the class; it was a key point many commented on in their final course reflections.

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<sup>1</sup> *I learned of these readings from the syllabus for Dean Spade’s Fall 2019 course “Queer and Trans Mutual Aid for Survival and Mobilization” (Spade 2019)*

## Co-Navigating the Mini Solidarity Campaign

The major project for “Rhetorics and Literacies of Mutual Aid” was a Mini Solidarity Campaign, in which students collaborated as an entire class to identify and work toward addressing a collectively determined problem of their choosing in our campus community. For this assignment, I limited the parameters of the campaign to community needs at DU, explicitly forbidding work with community partners outside of the university. Among other reasons, we simply did not have enough time to thoroughly explore the very real harms present in community-engaged work—reifying the colonial, ableist, and white supremacist logics of the university (Cheung 2021; Hubrig 2022; Itchuaqiyaq 2021; Kannan, Kuebrich, and Rodríguez 2016), not to mention actually understanding the complexities of structural oppression—in a way that felt remotely ethical or relational.

Because the Mini Solidarity Campaign was a large five-week project, I broke the assignment down into four constituent parts. First, we worked together as an entire class to come up with a range of ideas for a small-scale mutual aid campaign. Each student then self-selected into a small group based on one of these ideas and worked together to collaboratively compose a project proposal for their campaign. Mutual aid projects have taken on lots of different shapes throughout history, and so I offered students a lot of latitude and creative freedom for their proposals, so long as they were:

- Built upon theories and praxes of mutual aid;
- Responsive to and in dialogue with the needs of campus community members (broadly defined) who are most affected by the issues we’re addressing; and

- Designed to deliver some sort of information, knowledge, or material resources to a group or groups in our campus communities.

Additionally, each group proposal needed to address the following questions, some of which I drew directly from the syllabus from Sophia Sarantakos's (2023) "Introduction to Prison-Industrial Complex Abolition" graduate-level social work seminar:

- What/whose needs are you trying to address? Why? How do you know these needs exist?
- What local groups are engaged in doing this work in our community? How will you learn from their efforts, connect, and/or partner with them?
- How will you connect with those most impacted by the issue you hope to address and work in tandem with them to help provide the support they need?
- What is your proposed mutual aid project? What does it entail? How will it work?
- How would you propose to mobilize the collective efforts of our class for this project? In particular, what sorts of small groups would you envision as being necessary to carry out this work (i.e., logistics team, outreach and communications team, etc.)?
- What do you envision as being significant obstacles for this campaign? How do you anticipate preemptively addressing them?

Students came up with lots of good ideas in their proposals: warm clothing swaps, free fentanyl testing strips, period product drives, and student-run sidewalk ice salting endeavors (many students noted that the sidewalks on campus were injury hazards for many),



and more. Through a modified consensus process (Spade 2020, Vannucci and Singer 2010), we selected which project each class wanted to pursue for the rest of the quarter. Instead of students working in small groups on separate projects for the next month-plus, they'd all find ways to plug into a single class-wide campaign. The next phase of the Mini Solidarity Campaign was its actual campaign portion, which was far and away the most logistically involved, time-consuming, and challenging dimension of the assignment. For the next four to five weeks, it was on students to "do the thing"—to collectively enact what was set out in their or their peers' selected proposal. During our classes, we worked together to determine what needed to be accomplished for the campaign and created smaller working groups of three to four to carry out these duties (i.e., outreach work, data collection, internal process work). What students actually did here was quite varied because their roles and responsibilities depended on the campaign's goals, strategies, and tactics. Some wrote information-seeking e-mails to staff on campus while a handful of students designed promotional posters to be posted around campus. Others tabled on campus, created and circulated surveys, staged conversations with their RAs, and curated social media feeds. The idea here was that, if everyone pitched in within their working groups, the work of a single campaign would be made light(er) by many hands.

From my vantage point as an instructor, it was fascinating to see each section of the course develop distinctive campaigns over the term. One class collected survey data on the lack of menstruation products in student dorms and used that information to compose a collaborative email to university administrators (they never heard anything back). Another class took stock of less-than-ideal living conditions in their dorms—lack of air conditioning; infrequent garbage collection; broken elevators, showers, and furniture—

collected data on the matter, and (unsuccessfully) initiated discussions with their RAs on taking action to address some of these issues.

The campaign enacted by the third class was most successful, though the context for this project was quite different than the others. In this section, we partnered with a University of Denver student group, Happy Tamperers (2019), which seeks to do work around period education on campus and to increase the availability of sustainable menstrual products at DU and beyond. I had reached out to Happy Tamperers officers before the start of the term to see if they'd be interested in working together as a part of "Rhetorics and Literacies of Mutual Aid." Through our conversations, we decided that the work of one section of the course would be to create some sort of project that would advance the goals of the student organization. Having established this partnership before the start of the term, Happy Tamperers officers met with this particular section of the class a few times over the quarter to contextualize their work, listen to student campaign proposal presentations, and ensure that our campaign was responsive to Happy Tamperers's aims and needs. At the end of the day, the Mini Solidarity Campaign in this section took the form of an on-campus tabling event, during which students raised \$350 for the club, as well as a box full of period products, in two hours' time.

The final two components of the Mini Solidarity Campaign were more traditional in nature. In the concluding weeks of the quarter, I asked students to complete two assignments. One was a fairly standard reflective memo in which students meditated on what they did for the campaign, how they felt about their work, and connections between their efforts and theories and praxes of mutual aid. The other was a short letter to be written to those in future sections of "Rhetorics and Literacies of Mutual Aid," in which

they were asked to provide advice to incoming students about navigating the Mini Solidarity Campaign and/or class. In contrast to the more actionable aspect of the campaign, these reflective assignments gave students a chance to process their experiences with this kind of work.

One final note I wish to share about the Mini Solidarity Campaign is that, as with all of the assignments for my course, I used abolitionist approaches to assessment when evaluating student work. Not only did I feel as if the racist, classist, ableist mechanisms of traditional grading had no place in a course centered around mutual aid (much less other courses), but I was also cognizant of the fact that this type of work would be challenging for many students in content and practice alike. In particular, I employed a modified “A for All” approach to grading (Madoré et al. 2021) because of its explicit foregrounding of solidarity and egalitarianism with students. As I often tell those in my classes, it’s always challenging to learn new things and to put new principles into practice.<sup>2</sup> And so, I found that this orientation to assessment also helped to manage student pressures and anxieties around grading.

## **Pedagogical Tensions, Curricular Challenges**

Though it should come as no surprise to anyone, it was incredibly challenging to teach this course. Many of the obstacles that students and I encountered were ones I had considered in advance

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<sup>2</sup> *I recognize that many instructors do not have the freedom or institutional support to implement ungrading. Even as I am on the teaching stream, I am fortunate enough to work in a writing program where myself and my colleagues are neither questioned about how we evaluate students nor pressed about our grade distribution.*

and tried to anticipate. Others, I believe, stemmed more from my lack of familiarity with the institutional context and culture at DU. While students in each class split into groups to work on our collective campaigns, most everyone struggled with collaborative work across sections. A lot. A good portion of folks had a hard time attending class regularly on account of COVID, other illnesses, or mental health struggles. Many others, however, were absent or noncommunicative for a good chunk of the Mini Solidarity Campaign at large. Every term I teach, there are always a few students who aren't as present or who I have a hard time reaching. But last fall, it wasn't uncommon for me to teach a class running at 25% capacity. What all of this meant in practice was that for some sessions, we didn't have enough students in attendance to advance work on our campaigns. These dynamics not only stalled projects, but plugged-in students were often frustrated with peers who didn't attend class regularly or didn't respond to group e-mails or texts. Even though we often revisited our discussions of accountability from earlier in the term, carved out in-class time for campaign work, and worked on co-creating workflow documents, there were still lots of issues with student accountability. I recognize more extensive online and hybrid learning experiences on account of the pandemic have been difficult for students to square with returns to in-person learning. So, I suspect that the degree of responsiveness and flexibility this project demanded was simply too much for many.

A lot of these complications are direct consequences of how I ran the course at large. Consistent with my approach to grading, I maintained a non-punitive attendance policy in which students were not penalized for being absent. So, too, were assignment due dates flexible and negotiable. While there were soft deadlines in place, students could ask for extensions at any time of their

choosing, excepting the end-of-quarter.<sup>3</sup> As I tell my classes, not only are attendance policies and rigid deadlines often designed to punish (minoritized and multiply minoritized) people, but students are never just students either—they're parents, caretakers, workers, and/or folks with busy complicated lives.

While I stand by these principles, I wholeheartedly believe that these pedagogical decisions helped create the class-wide issues with groupwork and attendance that I described above. Broadly speaking, we know that those in educational settings are socialized into carceral logics, or punishment mindsets (Kaba and Meiners 2021). In that regard, it makes sense that someone enrolled in my class—a required general education writing course, at that—wouldn't regularly attend or submit work on time if there was little to no consequence to their grade for doing so. Moreover, accountability is challenging to cultivate and practice for anyone—much less (mostly) 18- and 19-year-olds in a ten-week academic quarter. So while I don't think stricter deadlines or less flexibility constitute any sort of pedagogical solution, I simultaneously believe there was a foundational mismatch between my class policies, the content, and DU students at large.

From an organizing vantage point, I also struggled with how mutual aid praxes unfolded in the course. As I explained to my classes in the back end of the term, most of the campaigns that students designed and enacted did not constitute mutual aid. Two of the three projects culminated with students coming together to ask

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<sup>3</sup> *It's also worth considering feedback I received from neurodiverse students, many of whom noted that the flexibility and latitude afforded by class policies actually made it more difficult for them to stay on track. I'm still thinking through how to build more concreteness into my class design without feeling like I'm compromising my values as an instructor.*

those in positions of power—namely, their RAs and university administrators—to change living and learning conditions at DU. These efforts, however, neither reflect the insurgency nor the by-and-for community dimensions of mutual aid. At times, I felt compelled to push students toward more militant and direct interventions in their campaigns. But ultimately, I found it more important for students to exercise their own collective agency through their projects than to use my position as an instructor to compel them to more accurately “do mutual aid.” That’s why I made sure to draw distinctions between students’ campaigns, which were still generative and valuable learning experiences, and what mutual aid actually is—both to guard against co-optation and to make clear pedagogical points.

## **Conclusion: Toward a Horizon of Ambiguity**

All in all, my “Rhetorics and Literacies of Mutual Aid” class was a mixed bag for me as an instructor. I genuinely enjoyed supporting students as they worked through unapologetically radical ideas, and I found it valuable to push back against liberal rhetorics of charity and progress in ways that were fairly comprehensible. I was also happy to find that a small group of left-leaning students found their way to my class, and that it could serve as one possible inroads to building an engaged political student community at DU.

At the same time, I struggled mightily with teaching this course at my institution. As noted above, it was of course frustrating to navigate the unpredictable tides of student groupwork and attendance. More challenging, though, was the overriding demographics and context at the University of Denver. The perspectives students shared often reflected a very particular type of rich white habitus, and, as an instructor of color, I put myself in

the position of performing increasing(ly exhausting) amounts of emotional labor over the quarter.

In all honesty, I don't think I'd teach this class again to first-year students at my current institution. I might consider adapting this course for an advanced fourth-year seminar at the University of Denver down the road. But right now, I think that the ways that my curriculum asked students to show up for each other was too difficult at this stage in the pandemic—and in this stage of their lives. As others have said more eloquently than me, I don't think students are trying to drop the ball, or ghost one another, or not show up for each other. They've been through a lot—we all have—and so this type of responsiveness was maybe just too much, too fast for first-year students.

Something I keep telling myself is that learning is not always visible to instructors, nor does it always or necessarily happen: over a semester, within a university education, or even across a lifetime. That's not to say that I suspect everyone enrolled in "Rhetorics and Literacies of Mutual Aid" will inevitably have an "a-ha" moment of learning about community care, writing, or rhetoric on account of what we did in the course. But just as the "wins" and "losses" of organizing and mutual aid work are never so simple or straightforward—are failures really failures if we're learning to do better next time?—so, too, does that knowledge apply to the classroom as well.

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