

Building Student Community through a “Drop-In Salon”

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Author Biography

Dr. Monica Carol Miller is an assistant professor of English at Middle Georgia State University. Her first book is *Being Ugly: Southern Women Writers and Social Rebellion*.

Goal

I wanted to find a way to encourage students to attend office hours. Much of the scholarship of teaching and learning emphasizes the importance of meaningful faculty-student interactions; surely, there’s a way to capitalize on office hours for this. I was also responding to a request by students in a hybrid writing course I was teaching: as the next course in the program that most of them were taking was online, they asked if I could arrange a space for them to meet informally in person the next semester, voluntarily, to maintain the community that we had built.

Background

Faculty and institutions have tried various strategies to encourage student attendance of office hours, from using various digital tools such as Google Hangouts to creating humorous videos about the wonders of office hours.³ Still, students continue to be reluctant to attend, despite these additional access points. One study about student perceptions of office hours notes that students were reluctant to attend office hours because they were unclear about their purpose (Smith et al., 2017, p.18) or “perceive[d] office hours as fulfilling only a single purpose, that of addressing emergency situations” (Smith et al, 2017, p. 19). Indeed, we are all familiar with such student meetings, whether about failing grades, looming deadlines, or emergencies in students’ personal lives.

However, the study also notes that, ideally, office hours offer opportunities to “foster desired outcomes of higher education [that] both encompass and extend beyond questions about specific course material; they may include, for example, mentorship, discussion of a students’ future plans and career trajectory, [or] fostering student persistence” (Smith et al., 2017, pp. 18-19). Such interactions are an important part of the social aspects of learning. Joshua Eyler identifies three elements central to such “social pedagogy”: “a sense of belonging, a focus on community building, and a teacher who models effective intellectual engagement” (112). In an attempt to foster all three, I sought to create an activity that would both act as an informal supplement to traditional office hours as well as normalize student-faculty interactions so that students might feel more comfortable seeking out other faculty interactions (and attending traditional office hours).

Application

With my all of this in mind, I worked to create an activity that would foster community-building and engagement through faculty-student interactions outside the classroom. While I still have regular office hours in my faculty office, I also reserved a small conference room in the library for an hour each week. Having a regular space in the library--away from my office and the classroom--allows for a different kind of faculty-student interactions. Given my fondness for certain portrayals of old-school academia--with tweedy professors and tea--I decided to call it a “drop-in salon” and offer tea and cookies.

I put the following in all of my syllabi:

³ Arizona State’s “Introducing Faculty Office Hours” YouTube video was even featured on NPR’s *All Things Considered* (Baker, 2019).

This semester, I'm going to be having what I'm calling "Drop-In Salon Hours" in the library. On Tuesdays from 1-2, I'll be in the library with tea and snacks, and all of my students are invited to come by and read, chat, ask questions about their classwork, or talk to other students. You don't need an appointment, and you don't have to stay the entire time. I've had students request more informal, social time to talk about class readings as well as other things, so this is an experiment I'm trying this semester. Let me know if you have questions.

I encouraged students in all of my classes--which include two face-to-face sections of first year composition, a face-to-face survey of American literature class, and the fully online professional writing class--to come by if they were free. Each week during the Spring 2020 semester, I have held these Drop-In Salons (bringing an electric teakettle, tea, and cookies to the library with me). Every week, I have had at least a couple of students attend--and they haven't only been the students who requested it. While the online students have been the most regular attendees, I have had students from all of my classes attend, not only with questions that they might bring to traditional office hours--such as help with rough drafts for class or about course registration--but also to discuss books they're reading for pleasure, their career paths, and extracurricular activities.

Pandemic Update and Reflection

Before the pandemic, I found that emphasizing the salon's informal nature seems to have especially encouraged first year students to attend, who are generally wary of seeking out my office. Further, one of the unexpected outcomes has been the interactions between students from different classes. For example, when a first-year student asked about visiting the Writing Center, one of the other students present was a Writing Center tutor, and she walked him through scheduling an appointment online right then. Many of these students juggle childcare, outside jobs, and other responsibilities; this informal setting has allowed them to share experiences with students they otherwise might not have met. I also appreciate the insights into their lives which this informal setting has allowed.

Importantly, this community continued through the shelter-in-place orders, even after all classes moved online. Because our students have very uneven access to resources—especially wi-fi and computers—synchronous class time was simply out of the question. However, with access to Blackboard Collaborate through D2L, I set up online office hours through videoconferencing at the same time that I had been holding drop-in salon hours. I was pleased that the same students attended online who had attended in person—both the students from the online class as well as students from Survey of American Literature and First Year Composition. I was glad that several students used the online office hours for their traditional purpose, asking questions about their assignments as well as wanting to talk more about the lectures I recorded and the texts they were reading.

One of the students had contracted COVID-19, and she would attend these video office hours to keep us updated about her and her family's state of health. Having this connection allowed me to put her in touch with my colleagues who had information about material resources which might help her and her family during the crisis. Another student's husband had been deployed to the Middle East at the beginning of the semester, and during the shelter-in-place orders was juggling her schoolwork, babysitting her grandchildren and assisting with their online schooling, and worrying over her husband's safety and health. Each week, she and other students compared experiences with their children's online education and other anxieties. The joy that we were all able to share at the news of her husband's surprise homecoming was as marvelous as our shared relief at her classmate's recovery from the virus.

Before the pandemic, I found the drop-in salon to be a way to foster student engagement and community in an era of shrinking resources for faculty, students, and institutions. In the midst of such an unprecedented crisis of Spring 2020, I am glad that I had begun this informal community-building already, so that I was

able to use it as a foundation for the sudden move online during the COVID-19 crisis. As we move forward into the uncharted waters of higher education during a pandemic, I continue to seek out ways of forging community with my students.

References

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