

Eyes  
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On our first day back in Fall 2020, teaching and learning in person again, I stood in front of my classroom on the pre-placed dot on the carpet that marked my socially-distanced teacher position. I looked at the Monday group of my Histories and Theories of Rhetoric students, seated in a grid of twelve desks spaced six feet apart. Their eyes, so prominent above their masks, were bright, nervous, skeptical, hopeful, unsure. “Hi everyone,” I said. “Welcome to English 212. I’m so glad you’re here. I’m so glad to be here.” My voice crinkled with emotion before I could finish those three sentences. Left to figure out how to handle teaching a class that couldn’t all meet in person at the same time but was still expected to meet in person, I dedicated so much time over the summer trying to figure out the way that would be least stress-inducing for all of us. Focusing on all of their eyes, I explained how they’d attend in person once a week and complete individual work on their off-days. “This is what I thought would make sense,” I told them. “But we’ll make changes if we need to.” I noticed that I was exaggerating my gestures because I couldn’t use my whole face. I found myself hollering from behind my mask, my throat extra sore from using my out-of-practice teacher voice at maximum volume. I found myself internally questioning why we were insisting on teaching and learning in these conditions. Everything about it felt so uncertain and wobbly. “I think you’ll like learning about Rhetoric,” I told them. That was Monday.

When I met the next third of my students on Wednesday, and the last third on Friday, I was also struck by their eyes. Amid all the mixed emotions, their eyes told me that they wanted this to work. “So do I,” I told each cohort. “We will make this work, together.” Some of their eyes smiled back at me. Some looked down at the desk tops they had sanitized with a wipe before sitting down. Some eyes gave me a measured gaze, waiting to find out if I would be as good as my word. My voice betrayed my emotions each of the first days when I told them “I am so glad you’re here. I’m so glad to be here.” I’ve been a teacher for many years, and I had never told a class this so plainly before. I had never felt it quite so profoundly before. Being forced to move instruction online abruptly during Spring 2020 made me realize what a gift it is to spend time with students, in person. This is why I made eye contact for too long on our first days back, willing them to know how glad I was that they’d showed up. That I hoped we could make this uncertain and wobbly semester into something more steady. Their eyes met me halfway. We did it.