"Magical Thinking" and Inward Engagement at a Small Liberal Arts University in a Time of Crisis

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Abstract. This case study essay draws on experiences and survey documentation surrounding a new, client-driven course, ENG337–Professional Editing, that was piloted during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The author, an Assistant Professor at a small liberal arts college, pulls from this experience and the attending documentation to interrogate "magical thinking," a concept formulated by Joan Didion (2007) and later repurposed by James Dubinsky (2010) to explore various dimensions of program development. Throughthe narrative of course development and administration and a retroactive summary of survey findings, the author demonstrates how "magical thinking" can be re-formulated to respond to our responsibilities to students and stakeholders in times of crisis. The essay concludes by calling on readers to not allow "magical thinking" to be a just-in-time reaction, but rather a regular expression of our values in the field.

Keywords: Editing, Course Design, Client Engagement, Magical Thinking, Times of Crisis

Programmatic research encountered a *kairotic* moment with the onset of COVID-19. I use that term as Debra Hawhee (1998, 2004) would: to signal the notion of an "opportune moment" for rhetorical action—the proverbial grasping of *kairos* by the forelock before the moment is gone. In 2021, in response to the onset

of the pandemic, this publication venue dedicated a special issue to COVID and the distinct programmatic problems associated with that moment. On social media and in our publication venues, instructors wrote about opportunities COVID introduced; we criticized those who sought, with different degrees of tact, "opportunities" during the crisis; we declared COVID itself the opportunity to discuss matters of disability, race, class, and entangled issues of social justice; and more than we'd like to admit, we struggled to align the priorities of our discipline and our commitments as academics, pedagogues, and administrators with the demands of this long (too long) moment. Yet, COVID remains present. The problems the pandemic outlined for us were not created by COVID and will not subside with COVID. Every day we should align our commitments as instructors and program directors with the demands of the present. COVID, I contend, just made our conversations about those commitments more urgent and values-based.

Although our field(s) could not immediately agree on the appropriate academic or programmatic lens for addressing COVID-19, we shared experiences that we knew required us to respond. Students were sent home *en masse*; classes were moved to remote or hybrid; childcare for faculty, students, and staff needed to be accommodated; campus technologies (for most) became unavailable; students and their family members became ill; students or their families were laid off or furloughed. In short, massive concerns distracted students from academic work. As a result, many administrators and faculty members adjusted their expectations and simply sought to get their students and learning process to the end of the semester. Moreover, communities that had formed around campus were fractured and needed to be rebuilt with the technology on hand (a scarce resource at many institutions), and the demands of the moment were to connect with students remotely and in diverse geographic locations, to meet them where they were, and re-orient them to what often felt like new courses with a slew of new, individual projects. How we addressed these demands—i.e., how instructors and administrators weighed the social and communal work of technical and professional communication (TPC) against the reality of the pandemic—reveals a lot about our often-conflicting commitments as administrators, faculty, and researchers alike.

One such struggle to align commitments as a program director, pedagogue, writer, and person subject to pandemic

conditions is the focus of this case study essay. Part narrative and part critical analysis of stakeholder engagement and editing pedagogy, this essay proposes an application and a rethinking of "magical thinking" (Dubinsky, 2010) that allows program administrators and TPC faculty to turn toward internal opportunities for engagement when external opportunities are scarce or unobtainable. In other words, though conversations around community and stakeholder engagement in TPC have a long and lively lineage (e.g., Batova, 2021; Bourelle, 2014; Henze, 2006; Kramer-Simpson, 2018), the following narrative indicates a need for programmatic scholarship that focuses on small programs, geographically isolated (i.e., rural) programs, new programs, and programs that, in the face of upheaval, rely on ad hoc and creative ways to bring stakeholder and engagement experiences to students.

"Magical thinking" is a concept lifted by James Dubinsky (2010) from Joan Didion's (2007) *The Year of Magical Thinking* and used as a baseline concept for "A *Techné* for Citizens: Service-Learning, Conversation, and Community." Dubinsky quoted Didion on the matter of grief: "you ha[ve] to feel the swell change. You ha[ve] to go with the change" (Didion, 2007, p. 3; in Dubinsky, p. 277). Dubinsky leaned heavily on these notions of change and suddenness and used both as controlling themes of his retelling of his work on building professional writing curricula. Dubinsky's vision of "magical thinking" is less severe as than Didion's strategy for addressing grief. It is a shorthand for describing the several rhetorical and material turns that shaped Dubinsky's program by calling on Dubinsky and his departmental collaborators to respond to them. "We discovered service-learning was a rhetorical strategy for gaining the university's heart," Dubinsky (2010) wrote, "which became central to our understanding of the structure for our program. It provided a means of building relationships through teaching and learning, which inculcated respect" (p. 293). Dubinsky's story is meant to be one of responsiveness. He responded to his institution's response to his pitch, which shaped the program. He responded to new-found allies and friends and to what he "discovered" along the way.

"Magical thinking" is, thus, a responsive activity, and it is not a groundless one. Program administrators know that certain principles (e.g., service, *praxis*, style) are non-negotiable in the successful administration of a TPC program and curriculum. Thus, "magical thinking," and the principles highlighted through it, should perhaps be reconsidered, given the recent reality of pandemic teaching. What follows is such a reconsideration via the story of a new TPC program and the pilot section of a co-created professional editing course. This experience and the course-related research indicate that Dubinsky's (2010)

"magical thinking" provides a rough strategy for approaching the uncertain as an instructor and/or administrator. However, only by fine-tuning this approach, accounting for both the velocity of change in our contemporary institutions and the need to hold onto the first principles of TPC curriculum and instruction, can "magical thinking" become a working heuristic in our present moment.

Dallas, PA, Misericordia, and Professional Writing and Rhetoric in COVID

Misericordia University is a Catholic liberal arts institution located in Dallas, Pennsylvania, a small rural town in northeastern Pennsylvania (NEPA). Locally, the town is considered a suburb of Wilkes-Barre, PA, in Luzerne County. Wilkes-Barre and Scranton constitute the metropolitan hub of NEPA. Like the rest of the nation, Luzerne County was hard-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic tracking national trends[1]. The course in question in this essay, Professional Editing, ran in spring 2021 and began as the region was on the downward trend from its (at the time) largest 7-day average of new COVID cases. (This spike would be eclipsed a year later by the Omicron variant.) By that time, faculty at the institution and students within the English department had become accustomed to a campus environment that shifted almost daily: varying masking, social distancing, testing, quarantining, and course delivery protocols tightened and loosened with each new revelation in case numbers.

Misericordia has largely followed other trends among Catholic liberal arts institutions, particularly austerity trends following declining enrollment. In fact, in response to enrollment trends over the previous several years, I was hired to remodel and relaunch a long-neglected "writing track" within the English major. The "writing track" operated as a hybrid TPC and journalism program since its inception in the 1990s, but demand existed—from administrators, department members, and students alike—to update the curriculum and course offerings. In short, the (at the time of my hire) looming pandemic, low institutional enrollment, and particularly low humanities enrollment created pressure cooker conditions to create *something* within the English department as quickly as possible. So, in fall 2020, as the pandemic conditions of education became normal, the newly branded "Professional Writing and Rhetoric" (PWR) track was approved as a formal TPC "track" within the English B.A. The revised program would not be formally

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[1] For the purposes of this study—and given the largely commuter-based student body at Misericordia—it's useful to consider COVID numbers at the county level.

instituted as part of the academic catalog until the following academic year (AY 2021-2022). Still, it marked a substantial cultural shift within the English Department. A side-by-side curricular comparison between the former and current "track" requirements demonstrates a major redistribution of skills and experiences for TPC undergraduates:

Table 1. Comparison of credit distribution between Misericordia's former "writing" track and the relaunched "professional writing and rhetoric" track

	"B.A. English – Writing" (circa 1990 through AY 2020 – 2021)	**"B.A. English – Professional Writing and Rhetoric" (beginning AY 2021 – 2022)**
Intro Course Requirement	None; advanced expository writing served as the *de facto* common course	Introduction to professional writing and rhetoric
Elective Distribution	15 credits total: • 12 credits across creative writing, technical writing, and media writing; • 3 credits of advanced history (junior level or above)	15 credits total • 12 credits across courses in TPC (e.g., technical writing, science writing, grant writing, professional editing), creative writing, and rhetoric and composition (e.g., teaching writing, rhetorical theory); • 3 credits of digital composing (e.g., web design, audio production)
Literature Requirements	15 credits total: • 3 credits of introduction to literary studies; • 3 credits of major authors (seminar); • 9 credits of junior-level literature electives	12 credits total: • Any literature electives at the 300- or 400-level

Table 1. Comparison of credit distribution between Misericordia's former "writing" track and the relaunched "professional writing and rhetoric" track (cont.)

Internship Requirements	6 credits (generally across two semesters)	6 credits (generally across two semesters)
Capstone Requirements	None	3 credits: • Advanced theory course (literary theory or rhetorical theory); or • Professional writing thesis; or • Creative writing thesis

Other than the internship requirement, the revisions outlined above are fairly sweeping. Without getting into too much institutional history, after hired, I identified clearly that few resources (and no full-time faculty) were dedicated to working in the track other than to teach material that was primarily creative-writing oriented. Even the one common required course—Advanced Expository Writing—had historically been taught by an affiliated staff member primarily as a long-form journalism course. Literature requirements were more structured and focused than the writing requirements ever were, a side effect of the program being staffed by accomplished literary scholars. The changes the department implemented reversed these trends. Literature requirements were reduced from 15 to 12 credits and opened to any literature course (i.e., students are no longer required to take the "major sequence"). The history requirements were replaced with "digital composing," an area largely within the purview of our nearby Communications Department. The common course replaced Advanced Expository Writing for a straightforward Intro to PWR course, covering rhetorical principles, audience analysis, style, and project management. These changes are reflected in the marketing language around the program, which emphasized that "PWR" is the *professionalized wing* of the English department. It is a bid—to be blunt—that students will be more likely to join the English department if a clear pathway to a profession exists built into the department.

To that end, the marketing language around the newly-minted

"PWR" program would come to emphasize internship experiences, "practical" experiences, service projects, and portfolio building. "Hands-on" became the mantra. Yet, launching the program in the middle of COVID tested that mantra. As the program was set to launch, my next step as administrator—seeking community partnerships, bringing stakeholders to campus and going out into the community to meet them at their worksites—became impossible. Thus, figuring out a way to address the immediate concerns of pandemic-era learning while teaching real-world exposure to TPC problems would prove the first of several problems that called on "magical thinking." I was called to react to the sudden change in the administrative circumstances and find opportunity within that change. I was called to determine what could be controlled in an uncontrollable moment and to leverage new-found opportunities. A pilot course, ENG337 – Professional Editing, was the suitable site for responding to that moment.

A "Magical" Vision for ENG337—Professional Editing

Editing's role in technical and professional communication (TPC) pro-grams is well-established. Lisa Melonçon (2021) has already identified the editing course as the most popular course among undergraduate TPC programs. Moreover, she has previously identified the large swath of programs that *require* such a course, most commonly characterized as a Technical Editing or, more simply, Editing course, and most com-monly at the junior or senior level within a program's curriculum (2019; pp. 174-175). As such, exposure to editing practices—whether techno-logically- or theoretically-grounded in classroom delivery—is almost a given in TPC curricula. Further, much has been written about the align-ment between editing pedagogy and professional editing practices (e.g., Dayton, 1999; Duffy, 1995; Kreth & Bowen, 2017; Rude, 1996; Rude & Smith, 1992; Thomas, 2009). Early field surveys emphasized technol-ogy's role—both digital tools and platforms—in professional editing work, with Carolyn Rude and Elizabeth Smith (1992) finding that a ma-jority of technical editors were performing tasks—notably many of the tasks surrounding the production of visuals—on computers. Yet the turn away from the purely technical, window-pane-theory-of-language approaches to TPC fields since that era is also pronounced. For one, Shelley Thomas (2009) indicated such a turn precisely because their research questions are rooted in an *ethos* that attempts to look beyond "grammatical correctness" alone. Another editor's survey by Melina Kreth and Elizabeth Bowen (2017) followed in these footsteps but with much more reach, noting not only the range of materials

technical editors are meant to work in but also the importance of workplace skills that range from collaborative and committee work to project management, HTML mark-up, manuscript solicitation, teaching, and graphic design (pp. 242-245). More recently, Suzan Flanagan and Michael Albers's (2019) edited collection *Editing in the Modern Classroom* contained Flanagan's and Melonçon's state-of-the-field essays and ventured into a range of modes for approaching editing pedagogy, be it affective, feminist, international, and so on, signaling a sea-change in editing pedagogy (and TPC writ-large) over the past decade-and-a-half.

Flanagan's (2019) takeaway after surveying the field has provided, perhaps, the most straightforward assessment of what an undergraduate editing course in TPC—particularly those at liberal arts institutions—could strive for:

> While it's not feasible to train students to know and do everything, we can prepare them to meet many industry needs. Technical editing students should be taught to approach editing work as a complex communication problem that requires strategic assessment; ethical, audience-centered solutions; and targeted attention to detail. In other words, students should analyze the writing situation and triage the text before fixating on grammar clean-up. Educators should stretch students' perceptions of technical editing and help students embrace a problem-solving mindset. In addition, educators should socialize students for collaborative work that demands strong interpersonal skills, technical aptitude, and flexibility. Students should be exposed to—or at least aware of—current editing tools and technologies, information architectures, and project management styles. (p. 40)

Flanagan represents a robust ideal for the range of material covered in an editing class, which is a heavy lift in the best circumstances. In a brand-new program, facing a room of students who, for the most part, have never encountered rhetorical principles before, how much time would need to be spent unpacking "analyze the writing situation" alone? However, even within the context of this specific course, in this specific semester, under these specific pandemic conditions, Flanagan provided a set of potentially-attainable end-goals. Given the population of the class (14 undergraduates including first-year students, final-semester seniors, full-time undergraduates, and part-time, non-traditional students, seeking degrees in English, Communications, Psychology, History, and Natural Sciences), it would be necessary to

build a common, foundational language. This would be easy enough; Misericordia remained in person—albeit in socially-distanced classrooms with far fewer desks—for a majority of its courses through most of the pandemic[2]. The far more difficult pieces would be things like soliciting revision, managing project workflow, and navigating collaboration, skills that Flanagan (2019) and, more precisely and pointedly, Kreth and Bowen (2017) cited as ideal for preparing students for professional editing's reality. And even more pointedly, it's the engagement pieces—collaborating with "live" authors, working with stakeholders in the editing process, and managing "live" projects, to use Lisa Melonçon's (2019) terminology—that rise to the top as most "valuable" in editing pedagogy today and thus become a controlling variable of any "magical thinking" around what such a course could become.

Plenty of sharp, insightful, and useful commentary exist—especially in this venue—about the changes brought to programmatic life and work as a result of the COVID pandemic (e.g., Henning & Bemer, 2021; Nagelhout & Tillery, 2021; Sides, 2021). Nora Rivera and Laura Gonzales (2021) provided one of the more generalizable approaches to come out of the field in COVID. By "generalizable" here I don't necessarily mean in the traditional sense of "generalizable data" or "generalizable findings," but, instead, an approach to the questions of pandemic policy that is widely applicable. Specifically, Rivera and Gonzales promoted a "pedagogy of love" largely informed by J. Estrella Torrez's work, intent on, among other things, "building community with students beyond the instructor/student binary" (p. 60). Following the recent turn of social justice work in TPC, Rivera and Gonzales have looked to non-profit partnerships for students to model ethical citizenship from their position as student technical communicators (see also Kramer-Simpson & Simpson, 2018). Such purposeful modeling of the conditions of technical communication work—ideally the type of community-centric modeling Rivera and Gonzalez explored above—is a widely-accepted ideal in the field today and echoes my own values as a curriculum designer. However, to echo Teresa Henning and Amanda Bemer (2021) in that same issue, the pressures brought to higher education by the pandemic and the attending austerity—particularly acute at small institutions—create an environment that demands strategies for survival, first and foremost (see also Denise Tillery and

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[2] There's not enough space in this venue to write about the spatial dynamics of a distanced classroom in higher education, particularly in a discipline that values animated collaboration and the movement of ideas and items among various experts. Suffice it to say that much material that would initially be more hands-on, in that first pandemic year, unfortunately reverted back to lecture-based delivery and solitary work with individual documents.

Ed Nagelhout, 2015) on the economic trends that shape TPC in higher education, largely a response to the "do more with less" ethos championed by many administrators in the field in recent decades.

In brief, ENG337 – Professional Editing grew from this crucible: the demand to (re)create a marketable program to increase enrollment, implementation of that program at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, financial and social austerity measures placed on me and my students during the pandemic, increased isolation, and desire to make this program as public- and client-facing as possible, in line with the major selling points of the program as a whole. And, though ample problem-solving models exist to address these multiple forces, the concept of "magical thinking" can be read as promoting a principle of balance, a balance that, in the face of a suddenly-shifting pedagogical and administrative landscape, helpfully puts administrative and programmatic truisms in the decision-making foreground.

Dubinsky's (2010) programmatic narrative from Virginia Tech discussed approaches of balance via the principles of "phronesis" and "praxis" (p. 277), a shorthand for "theory and practice," the "epistemic and [the] instrumental," or, following Dewey now, "open mindedness and responsibility." Dubinsky has forwarded what is now a truism: such principles ground the field, and the balance between the two has helped broker many a programmatic struggle (which, I'm willing to wager, holds true in this special issue, too). Yet Dubinsky seemed to separate the phronesis-praxis balancing act from his understanding of "magical thinking." For him, the "magical" sticks with Didion, in the realm of affective response to change, yet, as his narrative suggests and as my own experiences certify, part of the "magic" is, in fact, keeping this balance and other such principles in view as we react. At times, such magic is merely implicit, such as in discussions of buying out course loads for program development, appealing to the University mission and strategic plan to gain allies, and establishing credibility and sustainability through further growth and hiring. "Magical thinking," at its core, is a "rhetorical process," crafting arguments through "imagination, collaboration, and deliberation" (p. 292). It's about building bridges between contingents in a community based on common ground and, more importantly, "common practices" (p. 293). However, one critique of Dubinsky's approach to "magical thinking" is, quite reasonably, that he loses the element of the velocity of change that undergirds the idea at the opening of his essay. The element of the "unexpected," by the close of his programmatic story, is almost completely forgotten (p. 277). So, what, then, does dealing with the unexpectedness of pandemic-era pedagogy and curriculum development

look like?

As administrators, instructors, and designers, it is often difficult for us to imagine the shape a course can take—particularly courses under the banner of hands-on, experiential, and/or live learning until we meet both our students and our stakeholders where they are. Such unknowns are only heightened by the newness of programs (or programmatic revisions) or courses. They are heightened, still, as we encounter unknowns like pandemic landscapes. Professional Editing was presented as the debut of the new, hands-on PWR curriculum. It was marketed broadly across departments and colleges with my own digital flyer (see Appendix A). Such broad marketing and the language of the course flyer—emphasizing "contexts" of editing practice and the broad applicability of the "skills" for all majors—belies some of the un-certainty around the course's shape. Moreover, as institutional auster-ity measures and the reality of the COVID pandemic strained resources on campus (e.g., the office of service learning, internship coordinators), and my relative unfamiliarity with the region became exacerbated by those realities (i.e., in only my second year in the area, I was largely unaware of outreach opportunities in the community around campus and had only started sourcing contacts when COVID closed the cam-pus), it became necessary to narrow down a set of priorities quickly. That is, the "magical" process returned to that balance of theory of praxis; it returned to a process of determining how to hold onto what we value in the face of sudden and radical change.

What I witnessed at my institution heading into the first full "COVID year" likely reflects the experiences of most of this venue's readership. Students were largely isolated. Many returned to their homes in rural communities, and even those who didn't found them-selves housebound due to great uncertainty about how to mitigate COVID transmission with any success. Many were taking some of their courses on-line or in a hybrid format, those in dorms had little access to areas off campus, and what social outlets remained had almost completely moved to digital platforms. Although Professional Editing would remain an in-person class, strict distancing policies and a lack of technology in a largely first-generation academic environment made agile, lively, mobile collaboration difficult. Connections with industry were non-existent, not only because of my newness to the region, but because, frankly, few brick-and-mortar industries exist around our campus. Spotty WiFi, regionally and in most of our students' homes, makes digital, synchronous collaboration a non-starter for many. What was demanded, then, was a structure that would allow students weeks of practice in basic skills of copyediting (e.g., formatting to style

guides, grammatical proficiency) and require, at most, asynchronous and distanced collaboration (e.g., email or Slack-based collaboration in small groups on discrete projects). By reflecting on my experience as a practicing editor in the not-too-distant past, I settled on a publishing-focused course design and set out to recruit "live clients" among the community I knew best: the University faculty.

I approached faculty as potential stakeholders not just for the success of this course or these specific students, but for the PWR track as a whole. In the years leading up to this course, a statistician colleague had been offering a student-run service for statistical consulting on faculty research. For some stakeholders at the university, the Professional Editing pilot could point to a more robust, end-to-end set of student-led services for faculty researchers, a huge lift at an institution where many teach overloads and commit to onerous service requirements on top of their base 4-4 teaching load. Initial emails to the faculty listserv emphasized this as an opportunity for faculty to gain another reader and editor eager to hone their skills. The response was quick. I received many open offers from my office neighbors (in History, Literature, Art History, and Philosophy) and from those whom I knew from other areas (Biology faculty I had new faculty orientation with, a chemist I knew socially). Faculty from College of Health Sciences and Education reached out *and* forwarded the message to their graduate students. A member of the Social Work program forwarded some chapters in progress; graduate physical therapy (DPT) students sent along dissertation chapters; a nursing faculty member sent me a textbook chapter she had due to publishers in a few weeks. Faculty were—to characterize their emails without quoting them—overwhelmingly excited by the project as I laid it out and the opportunity they had to collaborate with our students. Many faculty were thrilled that—as so often happens at tiny liberal arts colleges—they would have an opportunity to work with a former student from one of their classes again. Across the institution's colleges, faculty commended the kind of inventive thinking that allowed students hands-on work under COVID circumstances. All clients expressed, to some degree, relief that they could have help pushing projects over the finish line. In short, the faculty did recognize themselves as potential stakeholders here. The success of this course, and this project, in their eyes, would benefit the university as a whole.

Of course, recruiting clients and determining project workflow took several weeks. Publishing schedules for different clients, projects, and disciplines varied widely. Some clients began the semester promising one project to share and, by the time client projects began,

had two or more. Others over-promised, finding that projects were too far along or not far enough by the time student editors needed to begin their work. But this same spirit of "magical thinking" ultimately prevailed, as the quick changes among project availability and project types were able to reflect the "magical thinking" I employed around the course design and the uncertainty of entering the editing world: projects are often not hammered down until it's time to work on them.

The semester schedule similarly evolved over winter break and, in fact, into the early days of the spring semester. Initially, the course's shape depended on the number of clients and manuscripts I could source (i.e., a course with two students per live manuscript would look very different from the one-to-one match I was able to facilitate). At the start of the semester, the course was formulated as follows:

Table 2. Initial weekly scaffolding of professional editing. Includes summary of dedicated material, primary readings, and major assignments.

	Unit Summary	Primary Texts	Primary Assignments
Part 1 (weeks 1–6)	Introduction to hand editing and basic computer editing (e.g., track changes and commenting); introduction to Chicago Manual, MLA, and APA style and resources	Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*; *The Chicago Manual of Style*	Weekly hand-editing exercises; timed hand-editing quiz; large (35 pp.) manuscript edit
Part 2 (weeks 7–9)	Introduction to working with clients; basic client correspondence; troubleshooting "live" projects	*The Subversive Copyeditor* (Saller, 2009); Client texts	Opening client correspondence; first round of client edits
Part 3 (weeks 10–12)	Advanced client correspondence; further project troubleshooting; negotiating author, audience, and publisher needs	The Subversive Copyeditor; Client texts; Required style guides (Guest speakers from publishing houses joined us virtually these weeks)	All remaining client edits

Table 2. Initial weekly scaffolding of professional editing. Includes summary of dedicated material, primary readings, and major assignments. (cont.)

Part 4 (weeks 13–14)	Reflection on the editing process and the course	*The Subversive Copyeditor*	Statement of editing philosophy

The framework for Professional Editing was fairly intuitive. The first half of the semester was dedicated to copyediting drills, emphasizing academic style and troubleshooting with the Chicago Manual. Students scaled up with graded work, starting with standalone sentences, then unified paragraphs, then multi-paragraph structures up to, finally, the chapter manuscript. By semester mid-point, with clients and manuscripts settled, the class opened up. We moved beyond task-oriented skill-and-drill approach toward a more situated, project-based, and client-driven approach to editing.

Professional Editing Experiences, Data, and Reception(s)

I collected data on the course via two mechanisms. The first was the relatively standard course reflection paper that is a staple of my major-level writing courses. Students were prompted, through that standard assignment, to reflect on their progress throughout the course, their struggles and triumphs, and to contextualize that experience through a mix of assigned readings and their own reference points. The second collection mechanism was a slightly-more-formalized-than-normal client survey. Although I would normally collect feedback from any stakeholder, external collaborator, or course visitor via informal email, the circumstances of this particular course and the desire to replicate any successes in future semesters inspired me to formalize the data ever so slightly. To be abundantly clear: data was collected, initially, for personal use. However, what the data came to represent—including a movement toward collaborative, co-ownership of in-house editing by students and clients alike and a signal that successful stakeholder collaboration could be found despite the upending of the pedagogical environment—make sharing these data worthwhile. Thus, retroactive IRB was obtained covering the anonymized dissemination of this small data collection.

In all, 12 faculty and graduate students contributed 15 separate manuscripts. Fourteen went to students (one for each student enrolled in the course), and the fifteenth, a textbook chapter draft authored by one of our health sciences faculty, came to me to demonstrate

correspondence and project workflow for students. Correspondence and workflow were largely driven by Carol Fisher Saller's (2009) *The Subversive Copyeditor,* an incredibly readable trade book focused on the work of editing about client relationships and readership. Some of Saller's advice is relatively par for the course from a rhetorical standpoint. For example, she has explained how editors can help shape the purpose and audience for a text by noting, "Since documents have various purposes, it makes sense for editors to tailor them to suit different groups of readers" (p. 5); or, in giving advice for approaching new authors with initial edits:

> [Y]ou will save yourself much grief if right from the start you limit your expectations and work accordingly. Be conservative in your editing. Summon all the generosity you can, keeping in mind that this writer may have a take on his readers that you don't necessarily understand. (p. 39)

That spirit of generosity (and Saller's refrain throughout the book: "First, do no harm") became mantras for both the students and me in the final two months of the semester. I corresponded with clients sporadically, but thoroughly. I emphasized that they were not expected to do anything "extra" as a part of this student project. I assured them that students were learning not just how to edit but how to manage the editing process, which means practicing generosity in accounting for client schedules, deadlines, and disruptions. As I explained via email to all clients: "Editors love responsive and agreeable authors but also have to learn how to deal with overlooked emails and authors who need to step away from projects for a bit, too." Saller's (2009) book is, ultimately, a guide for breaking into editing as a profession (freelance or in-house), and by attempting to mimic a single-project cycle as closely as possible, with all the bumpiness it promised, students were called upon to build relationships with clients beyond acting as a simple functionary.

This kind of relationship building was vital to the large-scale client project that anchored the course. The assignment language listed three broad assessment criteria for the project:

- Student ability to plan for edits, based on in-class (informal) discussion of client requests, the style guide the student is working with, and publisher guidelines;
- The quality and effectiveness of student correspondence with the author assessed through a collection of correspondence; and
- The quality and effectiveness of final edits delivered by the student.

In other words, the scope of the project extended into areas of editing

practice that would require some "magical thinking" on behalf of the student editors, too. No two client deadlines were the same; nor was the content of any two projects. Some clients required edits before the official end of the semester; others hadn't yet found a publishing outlet. Because of this variation, students benefitted from the first of the three grading criteria, which called on them to develop an informal community of editors in the classroom. The work of community-building in the classroom and outside of it would provide students with both the context to understand sudden hiccups in the editing process and the resources to address those issues quickly, effectively, and generously. Students working with the same client (i.e., pairs of students working on subsequent chapters or two separate articles in progress) could go as far as to coordinate schedules not to overwhelm the client with edits. Students working in similar fields—notably the laboratory and health sciences, as these were most foreign to the students enrolled in the class—could troubleshoot discrete problems within those disciplinary conventions. They found resources to double-check Latinate spellings of scientific terminology, located and shared disciplinary style guide web resources, etc. This iterative and communal practice of troubleshooting discrete problems resonates with the "magical thinking" Dubinsky has promoted: responsiveness and adaptation in the face of sudden, tricky problems, leveraging local resources to identify new opportunities. Perhaps more importantly, it echoes the kind of relationship building among editors Saller (2009) has promoted, too.

The correspondence between students and clients echoed both this vision of "magical thinking" and the principles of Saller's (2009) "subversive copyeditor." By opening such correspondence with generosity and the preparation necessary to adapt to client demands, students overwhelmingly found that regular correspondence, even at the level of a quick email "checking in" with any small questions, would prompt clients to reciprocate that generosity in kind. Multiple students found themselves suddenly adjusting to new deadlines or a client "ghosting" them. Students responded generously at all turns, even as they returned to me concerned that these variables—reasonably all things out of their control—would negatively affect their grades. We devised strategies for working around such difficulties, whether that meant delivering edits in smaller chunks to clients on a rolling basis, crafting email subject lines that would accentuate the necessity for a response or, in one or two cases, determining when it would be necessary for me to step in and broker communication between a client and a student. In other words, despite setting out with a fairly straightfor-

ward vision for how client projects would unfold, circumstances called for quick changes and an emphasis on strange things (like email subject lines) to keep the course running smoothly. This, of course, had the unintended benefit of creating lively discussion on unexpected topics.

The final edits themselves ran a wide range in terms of effectiveness. Twelve of the fourteen students finished on or before the class deadline (two weeks before the end of the semester; time left to reflect in discussion and in writing on the course). Many students (9 of 14; approximately 64%) succeeded in the "subversive" maxim of "first, do no harm," and both met all deadlines and introduced no new errors to the manuscript. Of those nine, all were equally effective in keeping clear and regular correspondence with clients, too. Of course, these findings are not too broadly generalizable; they are the results of a single class section in a single semester and quite purposefully presented here as loose impressions gathered by a triangulation of assignment grades, email archives, and instructor comments on manuscripts. Instead, more generalizable data come from evidence of effectiveness (and ineffectiveness) gathered through student self-reflections and client surveys. There, we can move beyond the binary "this worked" and "this did not" and toward things more descriptive, complicated, and indicative of the full experience of this course under COVID.

Surveys were designed to be internal and instrumental. The first round of surveys was to provide students a "cover sheet" for their client projects (i.e., a sheet outlining client needs and expectations). The second round of surveys was to help me adjust the project for the next time the class is offered. Given the size and location of the program and Misericordia, elective courses generally run on three- or four-year cycles. In short, though the sample sizes here are modest, each data point is deep, descriptive, and designed to capture segments of the semester experience. Data are somewhat generalizable in that, at least conceptually, it can speak to the needs of internal stakeholders and how those needs can be better addressed. Perhaps the data can even point beyond moments where "magical thinking" is required—moments of sudden crisis—and help reaffirm some truisms of our field and our programs.

To give a sense of the range of projects and the range of concerns present among the client group, six clients (approximately 50%) representing seven projects provided information for cover sheets via the first-round survey. The type of writing was nearly evenly split between articles and book chapters (four articles and three book chapters), but the disciplines were vastly different. Two projects came from literature. One each then came from history, education, physical therapy, nursing,

and biology. Unfortunately, only four clients provided specific instructions to their student editors, ranging from the very basic (e.g., "feel free to ask any questions"), to more common requests (e.g., "publisher prefers American over British spellings"; "this is collaborative work so the style fluctuates"), and, in one case, more highly technical and specific (e.g., "When identifying the genus and species of a taxon, both are italicized, Genus is capitalized, whereas species is lower case. . . . Time periods referring to Early, Middle, Late (e.g.) Cretaceous are capitalized"). All six clients were in universal agreement about the type of edits they sought, too. All six listed "proofreading," "copy editing," and "line edits" as desired services.[3] Finally, all respondents indicated varying publication venues (a question asked so students could, if necessary, begin researching the appropriate style guides) which, again, demonstrated a range of stylistic considerations. One article was targeted for a cultural history journal which requires APA style. One chapter was under contract with a major publisher in the UK which has its own in-house style guide. Another text was a chapter for a doctoral capstone project, which follows yet another citation style. In short, not only were students being suddenly asked to work with unfamiliar material and unfamiliar writing conventions in a brand-new workflow, but only half were given any kind of guide. The degree of generosity required from these students to their clients, particularly from some of the students newer to the program, was immense. And, most importantly, the kind of "magical thinking" it would take to troubleshoot editorial and stylistic questions while maintaining a quality working relationship with (for many) a client they would never meet in person was almost insurmountable.

The end-of-project surveys reflected the varying results, both in terms of the produced edits and the relationships built between clients and student editors. Eight clients (73%) representing eleven projects (78%) responded to this survey. Although still not an incredibly generalizable sample size, the results are still useful both internally and, with some caveats, they can help guide the operations of similar courses. The small uptick in responses, for instance, is notable. My involvement in the project waned after it began, so it is unlikely that any external factor contributed to the increased response rate. What I gather isthat, overall, the faculty and grad student clients wanted to support the

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[3] For clarity, this course differentiated among those items as follows: "proofreading" is limited to editing for grammar; "copy editing" includes issues of formatting, consistency, and citations; "line edits" extends to clarity and style at the syntactic level. These were the only options on the survey, and all respondents selected all three. Clients were, however, able to indicate specific kinds of content edits elsewhere, though all declined to do so.

continuation of this kind of service work, found it to be an exciting new feature of their academic lives, and thus took the time to offer constructive responses to their experiences. The feedback was generally positive, and, in fact, there was little correlation between student grades and individual client feedback.[4] On a 0–5 scale, in response to the question "With 0 being 'not at all' and 5 being 'completely,' how thoroughly did the student address the main editing tasks you had requested?" six of eight respondents responded with a score of 4 or 5; no respondent scored the thoroughness below a 2. In response to the question "How would you rate the quality of the edits and suggestions the student provided?" six clients again scored the quality at a 4 or 5 (four respondents went all the way to 5) and only one client scored the editing quality below a 3. These scores are all fairly strong given the rapidity with which students were placed in this unfamiliar territory. More surprising, however, is that the scores given to their correspondence and professionalism were even higher. In response to the question "How would you rate your editor's professionalism in correspondence?" all clients scored their editor at a 3 or higher, with five of eight scoring them a 5/5. In response to the question "How would you rate your editor's clarity (of their requests and their process) in correspondence?" seven of eight clients scored their editors at a 3 or higher with four scoring them a 5/5. The last scaled-response question, "How likely would you be to use a similar (free) service if not attached to a specific class?" yielded hopeful responses; six of eight respondents said they would be very likely (a score of 4 or 5/5) to do so.

On the raw data alone, 75%+ of the respondents appeared to have had an overall positive sense of the editing experience provided by the Professional Editing class. In less structured responses, the prevailing negative evaluation was attributed to timing and scheduling. One client expressed dissatisfaction with the way edits coincided with the Easter holiday; another cited limitations of their own time that made it difficult to course correct in the middle of revisions. One other client expressed minor dissatisfaction with some APA formatting. Otherwise, though, feedback was very positive. There were requests for student editors to remain available through the summer (two students, in fact, went on to continue working with their clients that summer) and beyond.[5] Most importantly, seeing the praise for student editor

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[4] In all but one instance, survey results were sealed until final project grades were finalized. The one instance was due to an incomplete set of edits and that client declined to respond to the survey.

[5] I've since gone on to help a few students work as freelance editors while they remain students in the PWR program. As of this writing, plans are in motion to provide stu-

professionalism provided the most affirming feedback for the gener-
ous, "magical thinking" approach to training them as professional edi-
tors and writers: students "rocked" and were "professional and fulfilled
everything [the client] had hoped for," they were "clear in [their] com-
munications," and "thorough, patient, and professional."

The student self-reflections, however, proved most valuable.
Framed as a final, graded, "statement of editing philosophy," students
were invited to meditate on their approach to editing, and loosely
recommended to make use of some metaphor while doing so and/or
engage some assigned or unassigned text about editing. There was no
directive to emphasize either the technical process of editing or the
work of building client relationships; students could choose to balance
their content according to what they felt most important about the
work of editing. To give a sense of the range of student reception of
the course activities:

- One editor's evolution required an abandonment of preconceived
  notions of good editing as "making the pages bleed." "Before this
  class," they wrote, "I strove to raise the documents I was editing to
  my personal standards. Instead of allowing my friends and family
  to let their individual styles shine, I forced their words to bend to
  my own writing method."
- Another editor emphasized that the class allowed them to em-
  brace "simplicity." They wrote, "My goal is to go into a work as light-
  handed as possible, abiding by the rules when I can and using
  consistency as a guide for when I cannot. At the end of the day, I
  am working in the best interest of the client; helping them make a
  clear and engaging piece of literature is one surefire way to ensure
  that interest is met."
- A third student lifted directly from Saller's *Subversive Copy Editor* to
  explain how the triad of carefulness, transparency, and flexibility
  benefit not only the author and their editor but the reader, as well.
  To quote: "These three components are key to working well with
  an author, as they rely on a careful eye to look over their work,
  transparency so they may see what changes are made to their
  work, and flexibility in order to work with one another's desires/
  requirements. These three things provide the basis for a strong
  relationship that allows the editor to please both the author and
  the audience's needs."
- Finally, an editor described their approach as "assertively support-
  ive": "As an editor, I know what the rules are, but as a writer myself, I

dents internship credits to work as peer editors for faculty and grad student research-
ers on a rolling basis.

feel it is also important for me to not only respect but also preserve the creative dignity of an author....[T]here is a fine line between the familiarity and professionalism of the dynamic between a writer and their editor. Coming from the familiar side, I would be supportive and stand up for the author in the event that an edit is made that takes away from the author's style or one of the manuscript's messages. However, from the professional side, I would be assertive and try to understand why that editor suggested making that change."

Although this is just a sample of student responses, the few listed here are fairly representative of the two prevailing themes across student writing: their evolving sense of what "good" editing is and the trickiness of balancing "good editing" with maintaining generosity toward their clients. Whatever "magical thinking" they employed—the constant troubleshooting, the reminders from classmates to remain client-centered and reader-centered, the sudden shift in class time and in office hours to address incredibly local, niche problem we ran into today—worked. Even the editors whose clients ignored them, as was the case with the second bullet point above, found growth via this kind of thinking.

Local and Global Takeaways

Most importantly, these results presented above signal an overwhelming success in this experiment with "magical thinking," particularly having it transfer to the students' bags of professional tricks as they negotiated professional emails, workflows, timelines, and demands within strange, taxing, pandemic conditions. In short, it is difficult not to feel proud of my students and colleagues as I review student edits, surveys, and reflections. Yet, these materials constitute an admittedly imperfect time capsule. Only small asides to limitations on time and availability and a mention of "circumstances beyond academic control" offer any glimpse of the pandemic situation students found themselves in during this project. On the one hand, this may speak to the fraught discourse of "resilience" that seemed scattered around popular discourse at the height of the pandemic. There's little doubt that those of us in higher education—students, faculty, and staff alike—are reticent to speak about external forces, particularly how those external forces may negatively affect their work and their work experiences. Given the subject matter of technical and professional communication—which has always been about the interplay between texts and the forces that shape them—this is both ironic and disappointing.

On the other hand, however, I'm inclined to believe that the silence

on pandemic forces is also a sign that the "magical thinking" approach introduced in this course took hold, becoming a salient *ethos* in the room every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon as we sat and discussed interpersonal problems like how to deal with an author who wants to include elements of text beyond the norm of a given publication venue; editorial issues like whether "etc.," being itself an abbreviation of a phrase in a foreign language, would be italicized as an abbreviation; or discipline-specific issues like whether the word "president" would be capitalized in specific fields when referring to presidents of known organizations. All of these conversations were had in the context of what we say to the client or ask the client, knowing what we know of their schedule and their approach to queries thus far. Keeping that social dimension in view when troubleshooting curricular questions, programmatic problems, or discrete editing issues, is what I take to be the catalyst for "magical thinking."

The benefit of a "magical thinking" approach to course development and design might just be the unique fit the idea can have in professional and technical writing. In a field marked by responsiveness to clients, editors, users, and audiences—and in a field increasingly articulating how to respond equitably and justly to the same—what Didion set forth, Dubinsky sought to fit to his programmatic contexts, and I have tweaked ever-so-slightly here seems to propel an *ethos* of effective service and commitment *in principle* to the stakeholders and audiences we work for. In other words, these experiences and this reflective, retroactive data dig helped me reckon with what "magical thinking" means and, more importantly, recognize it as a feature of what we practice and teach. If academic writing is necessarily iterative, professional and technical writing—and the administration of the same—is magically responsive. In that sense, the little discussion of pandemic conditions through stakeholder and student reflections here is likely because of the sense that students were able to latch onto a distanced, asynchronous, flexible, and individualized project management style that emphasized generosity and relationship-building in a time of social fracturing. They built community and participated in the social life of writing at a time when community and social life was being suppressed. Part of the "magical thinking" required of the students in the course is not just accounting for the conditions of crisis in front of us but finding active ways to work against those conditions. In turn, this approach can help us tackle future global upheaval and even more local—perhaps even personal—crises to come.

What's been presented here is done with nods toward generalizability but with full awareness of the limitations of the same. The sample

size—a handful of clients, most of a small group of students, a single section of a class—is the big barrier, for one. Replicability is likely another. We've adjusted to COVID as a field and a profession quite quickly, and I truly hope there isn't a need to respond to another large-scale, life-altering event anytime soon. But, unfortunately, it seems more and more likely that, at least on a small, local scale, someone at some institution will need to employ magical thinking as a response to some uncontrollable variable. Short-term pauses on teaching seem increasingly likely as global climate catastrophes regularly threaten and sometimes compromise the brick-and-mortar and digital infrastructures we use to teach and to collaborate. And longer-term shut-downs remain a distinct and terrifying possibility, too. The same climate catastrophes that knock out power could rise to the level of shuttering a campus semi-permanently. These climate realities and our unfortunate political realities point to the possibility of both small- and large-scale displacements or migrations of people. Political fracturing—particularly as the culture wars reach a fever pitch—threaten to shut down in-person learning at any moment.
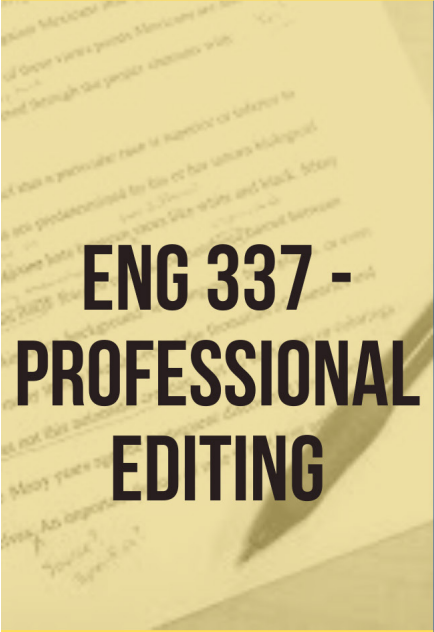
Or, more immediately, at the time of this writing we're experiencing another uptick in COVID cases in my home region and nationally. Loosened mitigation measures have me and my colleagues on campus this summer and unmasked. Students are moving to quarantine once more and many are left without technical or social support. They are again barred from libraries, from course materials, and, in a lot of cases, cannot even contact their own faculty. What's generalizable here is that "magical thinking," as I present it, sees the common thread in each of these cases, real and hypothetical: "magical thinking" calls on us to imagine the circumstances facing those we serve and to work against the conditions of crisis. With ENG337, the stakeholders and students I sought to work with and for, it meant imagining what having enough resources could look like despite social fracturing. It meant declining to let the institution declare the crisis "handled." It meant studying the proverbial "available tools"—what I, my students, and their clients had on hand to complete work meaningfully—and troubleshooting any perceived gaps. It meant doing all of this because giving these students the experience of editing for a live client is too valuable not to "magically" make happen. And, even better, it proved to be an experience valuable beyond just a grade or just a course, but a valuable, professionalizing, life experience for these students.

Programmatic Perspectives is admittedly an odd place to bring up biological, climate, social, and political catastrophe. However, these things that once felt so foreign to our work are increasingly present in

how we approach our work. So, ultimately, this essay is just one humble comment about how we as administrators, instructors, and scholars can face the catastrophes that are ongoing and unfortunately likely to come. Though I believe this *ethos* of "magical thinking" for addressing gaps in student, faculty, and programmatic needs is an effective one, its biggest shortcoming is that it addresses the local by incorporating local fixes. In other words, "magical thinking" tends toward just-in-time fixes. Perhaps, then, another use for this heuristic can suit this moment, one that uses "magical thinking" as an analytical heuristic—a tool for understanding the local and global forces hindering student, stakeholder, and programmatic successes but not a heuristic for how to respond. As this conclusion lays bare, short term, local fixes can give us methods for responding to problems, but they don't address the roots of these problems.

Appendix A: ENG337 Flyer

ENG 337 - PROFESSIONAL EDITING

**ENG 337
TR 3:55 - 5:10
Spring 2021**

ENG 337 - Professional Editing provides a deep study of the conventions of editing in professional contexts, emphasizing both grammar and style. The course will cover the conventions of copyediting and study common writing styles across business, scientific, creative, and other professional contexts.

Who is this course for?

- Students looking to apply their writing skills in new contexts
- Students anticipating a career with ample writing (e.g., business, non-profit work, education, communications)
- Writers with available credits, looking to hone their editing skills for their own purposes

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