Sixteenth-Century Community Bonds in a Twenty-First-Century Teaching Context

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**Author:**

Elizabeth Goodwin

**Institution:**

York St John University

On 17 March this year, my UK higher-education institution York St. John University suspended face-to-face teaching, marking a complete move to online teaching for the rest of term. In that week, universities across Britain and around the world were closing physical doors and moving their classes onto online platforms. My Renaissance history class’s subject that day, depictions of gender, aimed at developing students’ visual-culture skills. The attendant discussion focused on the roles of art’s (often female) patrons, subjects, and audiences, as well as the roles Renaissance art played in public and private spaces, such as the convents we had explored the week before.

Coincidentally, this was a week of teaching material broadly related to my own research. I examine communal bonds of women religious, particularly in sixteenth-century England, both with and without institutional boundaries to keep them together. In 1536, 1539, and 1558, monastic communities had their legal and often physical communal borders dissolved, yet many continued to retain these monastic, communal links for the rest of their lives. My research explores the formation and reformation of these communal bonds, thinking about visual culture, language, and identity.

Our learning community, while undergoing physical and emotional disruption, managed to continue, reminding me of the challenges to and commitments of the convent communities of my research. I offer here reflections on both teaching and research examples of maintaining communities at distances in challenging times. The curation of a vocal, active community in the classroom was a direct result of student-centric learning; these two interconnected elements reengaged and re-enhanced learners in a cohesive way without the physical borders of the classroom. This article explores how our Renaissance module maintained communal links built throughout the semester after lockdown, through the reiteration of these community-building activities online, in much the same way as the subjects of my sixteenth-century research had. It argues that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on us as a university, as a history course, and in this case as a small seminar group within one module, speaks to ideas of learning community (re)formation as a collective, reinforcing endeavor.

Fortunately, students in my Renaissance-history class had already had seven weeks of seminars that established us as a cohesive, active learning community. Justina Kwapy and others have asserted the importance and challenge of doing this solely online.[1](https://www.escj.org/blog/sixteenth-century-community-bonds-twenty-first-century-teaching-context.html#fn1) My students’ enthusiastic response to exercises that engaged them in collaborative groups enabled our community to be affirmed week after week. This began in the most traditional way, frequently relying on the physical proximity of students. Basics like moving furniture to make a shared, semicircular table when the room allowed for it enabled students to sit facing each other, without me as the instructor as a focal point to direct ideas at, creating a more inviting space for dialogue between them as learning peers. Small group work was employed specifically at the beginning of term, to enable confidence to develop assertions of ideas about a period few had studied before.

Building a timeline as a whole group, especially within a broadly thematic module, for example, encouraged active participation through a joint communal effort. Asking the class to establish a chronology of the Medici family within Florence, with students having read a purposefully wide range of historiography and contemporary accounts, meant that discussion had to condense and create order out of nonsequential events on the shared whiteboard. Quieter members of the class contributed to the group “project” in a way they had not previously done in more basic group discussions; experts at specific areas, they drew attention to elements in the historiographical narrative that are sometimes overlooked, prompting questions from the group as to why that might be.

I employed more creative approaches to engage students in the specific drama and creativity of the Renaissance period when the community rapport of the group was well-established. Individuals “performing” the speeches of Savonarola to the rest of the group, for example, encouraged the listeners to focus on the language, tone, and symbolism of the source, prompting ideas about the response to the speech by an enthralled group audience which could not have been engaged without the class understanding itself as a single audience. Turning down the lights in a classroom to focus on student-chosen pieces of Renaissance art on a projected screen allowed for a communal focus on imagery, before the presenter asked questions of the audience, in order to appreciate choice and reception within modes of patronage and artistic expression.

Through structured interaction, shared reading, and similar engagement with sources, our Renaissance-history class had more in common with my researched convent communities than I had previously noticed. Across medieval and early modern Europe, nuns created and recreated their communities through reading shared texts and through shared access to and engagement with visual culture that reflected and affirmed their female religious identities.[2](https://www.escj.org/blog/sixteenth-century-community-bonds-twenty-first-century-teaching-context.html#fn2) Communal and ceremonial activities like professions of novices built a further sense of community development.[3](https://www.escj.org/blog/sixteenth-century-community-bonds-twenty-first-century-teaching-context.html#fn3) These communally-enforcing links for English nuns did not end with the Dissolution; into the seventeenth-century, one of the most famous convents, the Bridgettine nuns of Syon Abbey, rebuilt itself as “pioneers of monastic exile,” partly through the reassertion of the communal memory and connections to its medieval and early sixteenth-century heritage.[4](https://www.escj.org/blog/sixteenth-century-community-bonds-twenty-first-century-teaching-context.html#fn4) The understanding of the community’s past reinforced it in the turbulent present.

When the physical spaces and uniform resources of our learning community were closed, students left housemates to return to their family homes or remained isolated in their student houses when face-to-face teaching was suspended. Everyone found themselves in different environments. Unreliable wifi, different time zones, shared and noisy workspaces, sudden caring responsibilities, and an increase in part-time work hours, all made it impossible for our community to convene in an online seminar via Zoom or Skype.

Reinforcing our connection as a united learning community was, then, an immediate priority across our entire course. Maintaining contact by producing recorded lectures explaining the “new normal,” alongside producing documents of step-by-step how-to guidance, were published with the aim of reinforcing coherence across our dispersed community. Simple question-and-answer discussion boards failed to spark thoughtful or engaged responses (or many responses at all!). It occurred to me that our classroom had not been centered on what appeared to be my asking direct questions of the group and waiting for specific responses. With only three weeks left of term to prepare students for their final exams and catching up with missed weeks of content, there was no time to practice these forums. Instead, we refocused, moving onto the type of activities that had enabled not only a communal togetherness but, crucially, communal learning activity in the classroom. In our specific Renaissance module, to reconstruct community bonds when teaching began again, online activities were structured around the same sort of student-centric learning that had previously enabled us to examine texts, sources, and historiography collectively.

In the first few days of our online lessons, peer-to-peer activities where students set their own essay questions, swapped them with classmates, then reviewed the subsequent essay plans, for example, enabled exactly the structured but independent interaction that had worked successfully before the suspension of face-to-face teaching. The speed and certainty with which students picked questions and offered responses to them suggested the community bonds between students had remained intact, encouraged by sharing ideas and reflecting with confidence on older knowledge and discussions.

Not all communal bonds were demonstrated successfully, however, in written engagement with one another. In analyzing fourteenth-century diary entries, students were invited to write one (deliberately) short wiki-style entry in order to encourage thinking about the conscious choice of language and narrative construction and then offer one piece of feedback to another analysis. Unable to spend an hour in class discussing the intricacies of the way the author presented their story and life writing in general, I used the online tools to our advantage. By consciously limiting word counts and asking students to structure their responses to “Explain, Contextualize, Critique, Analyze” the source, I hoped they would hone the skill of writing concise, considered responses for their exams. Equally, however, this aimed at enabling students to focus on the sources as creations, worded to provoke specific feelings or tell specific stories that may become lost in broader discussion. This very close, specific reading offered opportunities, therefore, that in-class discussion does not, and student responses spoke to this focused analysis. However, written feedback in “comments” from classmates was less forthcoming. It was only in the synchronized weekly chat that students demonstrated that they had read and understood each other’s posts by making references to previous postings. A mix, therefore, of more formalized written work and seemingly less formal “chat” created the same community engagement across the seminar group as had happened in the classroom. Collaborative activities that built on or depended on the same communal participation undertaken pre-lockdown furthered a community atmosphere outside of it.

A sixteenth-century convent example, the nuns of Syon, demonstrated, through letters and in the details of a biography of a member, the strength of communal bonds at distance. They thought of themselves as a single group, working towards united goals and articulating their togetherness through language. Such documents testified to the passionate commitment these women showed to their sisters and their community, even at great enforced distances and through severe hardships.[5](https://www.escj.org/blog/sixteenth-century-community-bonds-twenty-first-century-teaching-context.html#fn5)

I introduced synchronized text “chat” functions at the end of each week, for more formal discussions of the activities already undertaken rather than as the single point of reading reflection and learning. They were also introduced for more informal, collective, drop-in style purposes. These noncompulsory “chats” were based on an idea students had brought up themselves. When voicing complaints about a growing lack of motivation for revision, students explained that they missed working together and motivating each other, as they did in the library or the student houses they shared. This had come out of a very basic “catching up” question at the beginning of a formal synchronized chat. I had not intended to discuss this communal aspect of their learning, and the fact that they brought it up independently further spoke to the real need, usefulness, and interconnectivity between community bonds and student-centric learning. The conscious articulation of this synchronized, often unsupervised interaction as vital to their learning was something I wanted to recreate. Students then decided on the times of these informal chats between themselves, keen to have them at moments that accommodated varied work shifts and different time-zones: again, evidence of the group’s conscious focus on the inclusivity of their learning community. I set them up, but did not participate in them. These discussion spaces were used for informal conversation as well as sharing revision resources.

Scanning the transcripts after, it was clear that these two aims were mutually reinforcing. Remembering silly answers and in-jokes that they had shared in class provoked a breakthrough in remembering timelines or specific historical figures; the occasional discussion of other modules that they shared allowed students to focus on specific themes across both topics more easily. One student shared a community-designed time management app, aimed at keeping a group focused through the growing of a virtual plant, which certainly speaks to the community motivation of online learning that the student-only “chats” enabled.[6](https://www.escj.org/blog/sixteenth-century-community-bonds-twenty-first-century-teaching-context.html#fn6)

Not everything worked smoothly. The uptake of these activities diminished as the term progressed because individuals began prioritizing independent revisions with an approaching dissertation deadline. Many nonsynchronized activities worked much better with more input from me. I offered more words of encouragement far more frequently than I might have done in a regular seminar situation, perhaps more a reflection of the uncertainties of lockdown than of online learning in general. However, informal and formal feedback implied that the communal nature of all aspects of the online course was beneficial and valued by students. “Reassuring” and “engaging” were words that popped up in my official student feedback when addressing the move online, arguably confirming both the sense of ease and creativity that the communal, online activities sought to achieve.

A “welcome back” video, recorded in my home kitchen just before the Easter break, aimed at outlining the expectations, new activities, guidance documents, and the new exam format, received informal praise. Students mentioned, in kind emails afterwards, that the members of their Renaissance WhatsApp group (another informal communal body around our module) had found the video incredibly helpful and praised the maintenance of a sense of “normality.” Going forward, I would like to enable reflective writing on these online community learning experiences; to test these hypotheses over different sized classes, modules, and year groups; and to monitor the importance of or engagement within community activities.

As universities consider approaches to blended and distance learning, and as someone who has not relied solely on online teaching before, I was surprised at how important the bonds of the seminar community were to continuing learning, as was the case for female religious subjects of my research. It was the reiteration of these bonds of community—through peer-to-peer feedback, group engagement around single sources, or shared (virtual) spaces—that students invested in their own learning. The curation and reiteration of bonds that had been essential to sixteenth-century female religious communities (their shared identities going forward and their mutual pasts) enabled our learning community, in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic, to retain a similar, nonphysical but very present, togetherness.

[Elizabeth Goodwin](https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/schools/humanities-religion--philosophy/staff-profiles/history-and-war-studies/dr-elizabeth-goodwin/) *is a lecturer in Late Medieval and Early Modern* [history](https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/schools/humanities-religion--philosophy/staff-profiles/history-and-war-studies/) *at* [York St John University](https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/)*. She has previously taught at the Universities of Sheffield, Birmingham, Loughborough, and York, gaining her Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy in 2018. Her research interests include sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women religious, visual and material culture, and exile.*



[1](https://www.escj.org/blog/sixteenth-century-community-bonds-twenty-first-century-teaching-context.html#rfn1) Justina Kwapy, “Making Sense of Building Online Learning Communities,” in *Building Online Communities in Higher Education Institutions: Creating Collaborative Experience*, ed. Carolyn N. Stevenson and Joanna C. Bauer (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2014), 91–92; and Jody Donovan, “[The Importance of Building Online Learning Communities](http://blog.online.colostate.edu/blog/online-education/the-importance-of-building-online-learning-communities/),” *ValuED: Education + Your Life*, 8 Oct. 2015.

[2](https://www.escj.org/blog/sixteenth-century-community-bonds-twenty-first-century-teaching-context.html#rfn2) C. A. Grisé, “The Textual Community of Syon Abbey,” *Florilegium* 19 (2002): 149–62; Corine Schleif and Volker Schier, *Katerina’s Windows: Donation and Devotion, Art and Music, As Heard and Seen Through the Writings of a Birgittine Nun* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009); and Elizabeth Goodwin, “[The Selfie, Medieval Style](https://www.historytoday.com/history-matters/selfie-medieval-style),” *History Today*, 30 Jan. 2017.

[3](https://www.escj.org/blog/sixteenth-century-community-bonds-twenty-first-century-teaching-context.html#rfn3) Colleen Reardon, “‘Veni sponsa Christi’: Investiture, Profession and Consecration Ceremonies in Sienese Convents,” *Musica Disiplina* 50 (1996): 271–97; and Julie Hotchin, “Emotions and the Ritual of a Nun’s Coronation in late Medieval Germany,” in *Emotion, Ritual and Power in Europe 1200–1920*: *Family, Church and State*, ed. Merridee L. Bailey and Katie Barclay (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 171–92.

[4](https://www.escj.org/blog/sixteenth-century-community-bonds-twenty-first-century-teaching-context.html#rfn4) Claire Walker, “Continuity and Isolation: The Bridgettines of Syon in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *Syon Abbey and its Books: Reading, Writing and Religion, c. 1400–1700*, ed. E. A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), 156.

[5](https://www.escj.org/blog/sixteenth-century-community-bonds-twenty-first-century-teaching-context.html#rfn5)Ann Hutchinson, “‘Eyes Cast Down but Self-Revealed’: Letters of a Recusant Nun,” in *Representations of the Feminine in the Middle Ages*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (Cambridge: Academia Press, 1993), 329–38; Ann M. Hutchinson, “Mary Champney, a Bridgettine Nun under the Rule of Queen Elizabeth I,” *Bridgittiana* 13 (2002): 3–32; Hutchinson, “The Life and Good End of Sister Marie,” *Bridgittiana* 13 (2002): 33–85; Elizabeth Sanders, “The First Letter (Rouen 1587),” *The Poor Soul’s Friend and St Joseph’s Monitor* (Jan.–Feb. 1966): 11–22; and Sanders, “Second Letter,” *The Poor Soul’s Friend and St Joseph’s Monitor* (Mar.–Apr. 1966): 43–54.

[6](https://www.escj.org/blog/sixteenth-century-community-bonds-twenty-first-century-teaching-context.html#rfn6) “[Flora](https://flora.appfinca.com/).”