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Being Kind to Ourselves and Our Students in Times of Crisis

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As friends and colleagues who have been writing together for seven years, our weekly conversations during the COVID-19 pandemic have centered around discussing the adaptations we are making to our teaching and research. This reflection in two voices captures some of the conversations we have had in the last few months. Bailey teaches graduate literacy courses to practicing teachers at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. Jess primarily teaches undergraduate students seeking their first-time licensure in English education at the University of Nevada, Reno. In writing this article, we were hesitant to share some of the details of our students' lives. Yet, it seems important to acknowledge the new challenges they are facing. We have anonymized a few details while still capturing the realities of our students' lives.

Bailey:

At midnight, a month into the state's Safer at Home order, I received an email from a student who had just lost her mother that morning. The student's mother died by suicide and had written a note stating that she couldn't take being locked up in her house any longer due to the pandemic. The student had seen no warning signs. She was shocked and devastated. Another student in the course contacted me to say that he was struggling with living alone during this time of social isolation, and he apologized for missing some assignment deadlines. I have family members living alone, and I've seen how challenging that has been. The assignment deadlines have been the least of my worries. I assured the student to hang in there and to let me know if he needed anything. A third student was struggling to keep up with taking her own classes while helping her kids with e-learning, working at her own job, and helping her husband, who was struggling with the uncertain times of the pandemic. A fourth student emailed to say that she had never missed an assignment due date before, but she had just missed one and didn't even realize it. Over the past few months, the stress my students are experiencing has increased dramatically, and the needs of my students have grown in ways that I couldn't have accounted for when I started the class in September.

Jess:

I have students who are struggling too, but so far, they are more inclined to withdraw than to share their challenges with me. In one of the classes I teach that has mostly freshmen and sophomore students, I have one student who has completely disappeared. She hasn't participated in any of the online activities, and, more concerning, she hasn't responded to any of my personal emails urging her to get in touch so that we can work together on a plan for her to complete the course. I am worried about her and hoping she's okay, and I am sad for all the students like her who have felt frozen by fear and stress. Another student in the same class is dealing with his stress very differently. He pops into my virtual office hours from time to time to ask questions about assignments. When I ask how he's doing, he is almost cheerful as he describes all that he has going on: he is living at home with his parents, his older brother and his brother's wife, and their young children. All of the adults in his house have been laid off from their jobs and this family of seven is collectively living off of his meager student worker pay, which, thankfully, he is still earning while working remotely for the University. These very different circumstances are all impacting the decisions I make as their professor in their courses. Each of my students has

a lot going on, as we all do, and it is difficult to create a class that meets all of their needs.

Bailey:

I began the transition to online teaching during the pandemic with synchronous classes on Zoom. During one discussion-based class, some students on the Zoom call had patchy internet access that caused them to cut out when they talked. Babies, children, and dogs made appearances in the background as students tried to multitask being parents and family members while also being students at the same time. I assured the students that I welcomed the babies, children, and dogs as part of our Zoom community, but I could see that the students were stressed by trying to manage class and their home lives simultaneously.

Eventually I decided to move instruction to asynchronous online teaching via Canvas, and some students expressed disappointment that we had stopped meeting synchronously via Zoom. They missed the face-to-face community and discussions we had. For some students, having the structure and expectations of meeting in class each week was a welcome reprieve from the stress and uncertainty of other parts of their lives. Other students were relieved. They needed the flexibility of asynchronous classes to care for their families and work at their own jobs. I wondered if I had made the right decision to transition from synchronous to asynchronous learning.

In order to ease the transition to asynchronous learning, I offered writing consults via phone appointments to students who wanted them. During these conversations, we talked about their writing, and we talked about our lives outside of class, too. Students were eager to share about their home lives during the pandemic and how their own online teaching was going. Many of my students, K-12 teachers, were asking themselves the same questions about how to balance students' needs as they moved their teaching to online formats. It was nice to make connections and restore some of the community we had built during in-person class sessions. These phone calls took time, but the students seemed to appreciate the personal connection as much as the writing instruction.

Jess:

During this pandemic, I have also questioned my pedagogical choices. During my first week of online office hours for my class Teaching Writing, one of my students popped in to say hi and to see how I was doing with the transition. Near the end of our conversation he told me he was sad that I had

cut the multigenre research assignment from the syllabus. He showed me the pile of books on his desk that he had brought home so that he could continue his research and writing while at home.

This conversation made me sad too. Over spring break, the week before we were to officially begin online instruction, I had agonized over how to adjust the work for the remainder of the semester. I was overwhelmed by my own feelings at the time: fear for the health of myself and my loved ones, grief at the loss of the rest of the semester with my students, anxiety about my ability to create an online class that would come anywhere close to the community we had built in class. During that week of scrambling to prepare in a time of major uncertainty, I made the decision to cut the multigenre research project, along with the weekly personal writing, from my class.

In the end, I cut the writing opportunities in order to keep the focus on pedagogy. Before the semester began, I had carved out precious time in the syllabus for weekly personal writing, discussions with peer writing groups, and projects that showcased students as writers, not just as future teachers of writing. I know and believe that we become better teachers of writing when we are writers ourselves, and, in the face of online instruction, I abandoned that. I let it go because I was afraid of time lost in their teacher education programs. I feared that if we didn't read the textbook and practice the pedagogies, they would arrive in their own classrooms feeling unsure of their abilities to teach writing. I worried that access issues and the demands of students' new lives at home wouldn't allow them to conference with one another, share their writing, and collaborate in the process of researching a topic and writing about it in a way that felt new to most of my students.

Now, as the end of the semester draws closer and we settle into an uneasy routine, I regret my decision to cut the personal and multigenre writing from the syllabus. Keeping those writing opportunities might have given students the chance to process some of their feelings about their lives. But I am trying to be kind to myself and realize that I did the best I could in extraordinary circumstances. Teaching in a time of pandemic has made me change my teaching in ways that I wouldn't dream of if we were still meeting face-to-face.

What we've realized over the past few months of teaching during the pandemic, is that we need to be kind to ourselves and our students. Not all of the decisions we make are good ones, nor are they necessarily the same decisions we would make

under different circumstances. But we're all making the best decisions we can in the moment, given the constraints. Everyone is trying to make things work in their own lives, even while there are many moving pieces and constantly-changing targets. Some days might feel too overwhelming and too heavy to be able to make much progress, and on days like those, we are still doing the best we can. As Anne Elrod Whitney (2020) describes in her NCTE blog post, sometimes offering nothing is a gift too. She says, "Instead of pretending all is well, I am assuming people are hurting, that nobody and nothing are quite well right now. Yes, we carry on. We're beautiful that way. But our vulnerability is beautiful too" (para. 11). When nothing is quite right, doing the best we can means forgiving ourselves for the things we've had to let go. Each new dilemma presents an opportunity to be gentle with ourselves and our students and to continue to do the best we can.

References

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