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Building Online Writing Community through Other-Oriented Lenses in an Era of Crisis

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Life is different amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, no doubt. The opening weeks brought hours and hours of sifting through information that overloaded our news programming, our social media feeds, and both the data-driven and opinion pieces shared with us by our colleagues, friends, family members, and even students.

As we tried to process the unprecedented changes in our world—and the rapid pace at which they were unfolding—our household conversations changed too. In our household, my husband and I were no longer plotting how to get kids to and from practices and afterschool commitments, venting of daily workplace woes, chatting about Summer plans and where we might enjoy some family time or a meal out over the weekend. No, no. Instead, we were navigating how to get home offices up and running, how to accommodate our children’s social-emotional and academic needs, how to navigate a day of working from home while homeschooling our children, how to help our vulnerable loved ones while keeping ourselves healthy and safe, how to find community in isolation, how to support our students and colleagues in trying times, how to plan for potential job losses and economic losses, and how to make occasional runs to the grocery store as efficient and safe as possible.

All of this happened in just a matter of days.

As the days have turned into weeks, we’re still here discussing these same matters. Now, though, we’ve got some experience and some distance from this initial turn of events to bring to the conversation. Exceedingly apparent in our brief but frequent interactions throughout the busy days of working, homeschooling, parenting, managing a household, and communicating with and supporting loved ones is this: we can not manage this pandemic alone. We need each other and we need our extended community of loved ones now more than ever in hopes of seeing the other side of this virus in health.

We need weekly Zoom sessions with friends to share our daily challenges and triumphs, a laugh, and encouragement. We need our text strands with other parents to swap homeschool plans, behavior charts, and sweet funny stories about our kids. We need our parents, siblings, and extended family to keep sharing the pictures of happy kids, pets, and memes that recognize our common values and shared experiences. We need our colleagues and students to navigate new terrain with us through phone calls, emails, online learning platforms, and video conferences.
And our kids need the occasional facetime call with the friends they miss so much and the Zoom meetings or Youtube read-alouds during which they can see and hear the love in their teachers’ faces and voices. They need the sidewalk chalk art left by their buddies. They need to wave to neighbors who ride past our house on bikes. They need the window visits from their grandparents and the letters from their cousins.

The need for others and community in pandemic times
How do I know my family and I need these moments with others? Because I see my daughter light up at the sight of her teacher and classmates on Zoom. And I see her spirits lift after a Facetime call involving lots of dancing and laughing with a good friend. I listen to my son recount the funny things a friend said and did after a Zoom call and I hear him when he says, “talking to my friends was the best part of my day, mom” before bedtime. I see my kids’ eyes shine as they open mail from cousins, read enthusiastically the learning challenges their grandparents send them via mail, and feel pride as they mail art and letters to family members. I hear my husband’s laugh as he catches up with an old friend on the phone and see his smile as he relays how a neighbor is doing after having a chat—or yell—across backyards.

I feel the excitement, too, at a scheduled video chat with friends, as well as the motivation it brings to conquer the work, home, and family-oriented tasks that lead up to it. I feel the sense of pride after a video chat with a student who tears up as they get ready to hang up, saying, ‘Thanks. I didn’t know how I was going to do this and now I do.”

We all need all of this because we are social. We are emotional. We are human.

Mitch Albom recently wrote about this in his weekly op-ed for the Detroit Free Press. He reminds us about focusing on our “one thing” to inspire us through this pandemic: “One thing. Find it. The one positive. The one joy you’d forgotten about. The one part of the day that brings you peace.” For Mitch, it’s the moment each morning that he hugs Knox, his foster child. For me, it’s the tender moments with my own children, as well as moments of connection with trusted and familiar family, friends, colleagues, and students in new ways. While the “one thing” means something different to each of us, it often involves people other than ourselves.

Reflecting on my own family situation frames ways, of course, that I think about my students and their unique situations. In talking with students these past few weeks, I’ve learned that, in fact, students and their families are experiencing needs akin to my family’s needs in ways that are, of course, unique. We need to know that while our stories are entirely unique and ours, they are also entirely human and in ways, like those of our loved ones and those in our extended communities.

Lenses as ‘ways of seeing’ and ‘re-envisioning’
Georgia Heard, a teacher-writer highlighted in my English 315: Teaching Writing in the Elementary and Middle School undergraduate writing methods course, teaches us how we
can help our students navigate their developing identities as writers through the use of lenses as we engage in revision practices. She writes:

Stepping back and rereading writing is what authors do. I’ll reread parts of my writing dozens of times—sometimes using different lenses each time depending on the kind of writing I’m doing. Students can use this rereading self-assessment strategy for example after they’ve written their leads, after they have written several paragraphs, and also after they’ve completed their drafts. (p. 20)

Many of my methods students, in fact, are working Heard’s lenses into their own ‘Teaching Writing Pedagogy Projects’—unit plan designs and materials accompanied by research-driven rationale statements—which they are currently workshopping online. Their projects detail how to engage young writers in using lenses, or ‘ways of seeing,’ including the 'lens of a stranger' ‘the lens of language’, the 'lens of feeling', and the 'lens of finding your best writing

In discussing how to apply these lenses throughout the writing process to improve our writing, Heard outlines prompts to help frame each lens per genre in her book The Revision Toolbox: Teaching Techniques that Work. For instance, when applying the ‘lens of focus and clarity’ to our narrative writing, Heard encourages readers and writers to consider these questions:

What is the heart of the story? Is the heart or focus clear? Are characters developed? Is my focus too big or too narrow? Have I stayed on track for the entire piece? Do all my details and anecdotes support my focus? Are there places where the language or details could be clearer? Are there places where I could cut out my words, phrases, or sentences that don’t support my focus? (p. 26).

In an ‘ah ha’ moment of sorts, I thought: my students and I are teacher-writers like Heard, so let’s build on her notion of lenses as we conceptualize and describe our own lens for our online coursework during this pandemic. The writing teacher in me knew that the routines and procedures we’d cultivated in our face-to-face classes, workshops, and interactions were those we’d build upon and re-imagine together in the online space. Heard’s lenses were one of these familiar pieces important to our new puzzle, as we were in a position to, literally, revise our semester together. I also knew as a human being that these lenses could be a tangible ‘one thing,’ like Mitch Albom says, that reiterated our values as writing teachers, as we moved forward together.

An other-oriented lens for online writing, workshopping, and learning in pandemic times

As methods students and I transitioned and adapted to our new reality—online learning in lieu of face-to-face classwork and K-5 classroom fieldwork—we decided to borrow heavily from ‘the lens of focus’ in an effort to stay focused on the tasks required for a successful completion of the semester and also the ‘lens of feeling,’ in recognizing our myriad, ever-changing feelings as we navigate the COVID-19 pandemic. Heard notes that the ‘lens of feeling’ helps us ‘pay attention to the mood of a piece,” which we drew on to help us pay attention to the varying emotions and diverse situations of ourselves and others in our
classroom community (p. 24). Revised sentence should read: We also drew on Donald Murray's (1969) notion of "shared responsibilities" in the writing classroom, which we studied early in the semester, in recognizing our individual successes are most certainly derived from our collective individual efforts.

Our ‘315 in COVID-19 lens’ recognizes, as I shared with students in announcement just after COVID-19 prompted our campus closure, that “we are all experiencing this differently, and thus, we all must deliberately extend grace to ourselves and others in our communities, including this learning community.” Just as we did in our face-to-face writing workshops, our online workshops include the aim to read and respond to our own work and the work of others from a place of empathy and understanding, first and foremost. It also recognizes that we may run into unanticipated and new roadblocks, the kind a pandemic brings on and that we’ve never faced before, and that re-envisioning how the practices we’ve always valued as writing teachers might look and play out a bit different in the online space during pandemic times.

Our ‘315 in covid-19 lens’ has evolved to include these features and practices:

**Materials workshopped for clarity**
*For instructor:*
I give all materials written for the whole-class (announcements, notes and guides, assignments, learning materials) the 24-hour rule, meaning I give myself a minimum of a 24-hour window to revise and edit before posting materials. My revision strategies and practices include the following:

- Reading aloud my material with a ‘lens of clarity’ and making appropriate changes
- Sending my material to a colleague for review and using colleague’s feedback to make appropriate changes

*For students:*
Student are encouraged to also apply the 24-hour rule to all online submissions (assignments, discussion board posts, peer review contributions)

*For instructor and students:*
It is understood that individualized communication, such as emails and instructor-response to student work, may not undergo the 24-hour rule, though a read-aloud using the ‘lens of clarity’ and ‘lens of so what?’ is encouraged.

**Multiple informative and encouraging communications each week**
*For instructor:*

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I communicate multiple times each week with all students via Blackboard, our institution’s virtual learning management system. These communications are constructed via “the sandwich” approach:

- a warm greeting that recognizes our individual experiences during the collective pandemic
- important reminders, information, and resources
- a warm invitation to communicate with classmates, first, and then with me regarding individual coursework ideas, concerns, questions

For students:
Students are instructed to check their email (which sends copies of Blackboard Announcements) and Blackboard daily. Students are encouraged to print, as able, important checklists and resources and to revisit materials as they work on course assignments.

Assignments that focus on social, collaborative learning

For instructor:
I make a conscious effort to keep collaboration at the center of our work together as reflected in assignments such as these: discussions via discussion board, peer review via file exchange and discussion board, collaborative writing via googledocs, face-to-face virtual conferencing via Zoom, and publishing via googlesites. In making the collaborative workshopping that grounded our face-to-face interactions central to our virtual interactions, I generate guides for and share links to demonstrative resources with students (such as a how-to guide for publishing public googlesites).

For students:
Students are versed in participating in collaborative routines and procedures in our face-to-face setting and, as future teachers, value these practices as we transition to our online-only learning experience. While some tools, such as Zoom and googlesites, are new to some students, most have experience with similar online tools. Students are asked to rely on their previous experience with these tools and to also use the instructor-generated tutorials for online tools support.

Open door phone and video conference policy

For instructor and students:
Students are invited, just as during they were when we met face-to-face, to contact me via email or phone to discuss coursework. They may also request a video conference via email or phone.

Our efforts this semester, as illustrated above, are most certainly collective. Our ‘315 in COVID-19 lens’ has evolved into our ‘one thing’ keeping us together and keeping us moving when we might otherwise freeze, falter, or fall.

As we approach the conclusion to our semester, I am more inspired now than ever before by my students and the power that rests in our collective experiences. I’m inspired by the
student who goes beyond the peer review requirements on Blackboard to offer a video conference to a fellow student. I’m inspired by the student who, despite losing their job and daycare, finds ways to homeschool 2 young children and submit excellent coursework. I’m inspired by the authentic camaraderie building in online discussion and response groups, as evidenced in students’ detailed, growth-oriented responses to one another, and even in an offer from one student to mail homemade masks to classmates. I'm inspired by the student who loaned an extra laptop to a classmate who didn't have the means to replace their broken computer.

I’m inspired by the student who emailed me to ask if my own small children could benefit from their remote video tutoring, free of charge. I’m inspired by the student who despite losing a family member to COVID-19, is managing to communicate with me in making plans to successfully complete the course.

We need to know that while our stories are entirely unique and ours, they are also entirely human and in ways, akin to those of our loved ones and those in our extended communities. We need to keep recording. Keep sharing. Keep listening and entertaining different lenses. In so doing, we can hope to come out, albeit changed and different, on the other side of this virus.

And just maybe our changed, different selves will come out stronger and more bound to one another than we’ve ever been.

References
