What COVID-19 is Teaching Me About Writing

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I had all my teacher education candidates prepared.

Spring 2020 student teachers had a plan for edTPA competition. They were set to create learning segments, record videos, and collect assessment to turn in their completed portfolios.

We had just completed collaborative unit design in the final methods course I teach. When we returned from spring break we were going to work on putting the collaborative unit together, discuss revisions, and move toward candidates working to create their own online thematic units.

I had my first-year writing students ready.

We had just finished conferencing about their visual analysis papers and textual analysis papers that they would be combining into a rhetorical analysis. (They were looking at lyrics and video imagery of a song of their choice.)

I was ready to spend break finishing up revisions on an article that I wanted to send out before the end of March.
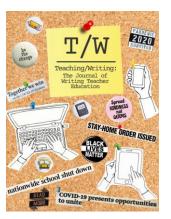
March 6, 2020:

I met with one of my student teachers at a local coffee shop. It was the final day of class before the university officially went on spring break. She took the day off from student teaching to meet with me and go over the edTPA. We talked about teaching, applying for jobs, revising and completing the edTPA, and graduation.

March 6, 2020 was the last day of normal teaching life for me.

Soon, it all changed.

It started with emails about study abroad. First there were plans for contingencies in case we couldn't travel. Those rapidly changed to discussing the potential cancelation of some study abroad trips and finally the official university cancelation of all spring and summer study abroad trips for 2020.

Shortly after that, emails about an additional week of break to allow faculty to plan for remote learning with the possibility of returning to in-class and on-campus learning after

April 3. And, shortly into our "prep week" a decision not to return to face-to-face classes Spring semester.

I teach at a regional, state institution in rural Illinois. My university serves a number of students who are from the Chicagoland (Cook County) area which has surpassed Queens, New York as the county with the most COVID-19 cases in the country. 34 percent of our students are first generation college students and many are dependent on state and national aid to support their education. Our English Education program is housed in the English department but we have strong ties to our College of Education who is in charge of student teaching and practicum placements and Unit assessments.

My initial questions and concerns were around redesigning my courses, quickly.

I had to think about how to best support the needs of students, what interfaces to use in my teaching, how to engage students in new technologies, and how to make sure that my students remained connected to and encouraged.

How do I support students who thought they were returning to campus after spring break and now may not have access to their materials or technologies?

How do I find ways to connect with students and foster the classroom environment that that I find so important in my face-to-face teaching (or that I foster in different ways when I am doing online teaching)?

I had to change my semester plans and find ways to teach writing and challenge student writers in authentic ways that pushed them as writers and as citizens.

The changes I made and what I learned

Because I work with English Education students and am one of two faculty who teach English methods, I have English education students in multiple courses. I teach the writing methods course as well as the final methods course prior to student teaching. This year I taught basic writing in the fall and then worked with over half that class in my first-year writing in the spring, so I had about 12 writing students who I had worked with for the entire year. This meant that I was working with many students in the spring who I had already established relationships with in the fall.

First-year Writing

My first-year students needed encouragement. They needed to know that I was there for them and that they could make it through whatever they were working on. They needed to have access to me in ways that made them feel that there was some semblance of normalcy in their lives. I had students who were traveling between houses, watching younger brothers and sisters, taking care of cousins. I had students who were doing the majority of work on their phones. I had to set up a variety of ways they could check in with me.

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We conferenced via Zoom and FaceTime. I gave out my cell phone number. Students texted with questions or when they needed to talk or "meet" online. Sometimes we would FaceTime in groups. Some of my students were working with each other, encouraging each other, and pushing one another to complete work. They needed that grounding. They did not want to be in online classes. As much as they sometimes struggled to make it to class or complained about our rural town as it compared to Chicago, they missed it. They missed their friends and they missed their classes. FaceTime and texting students gave them that connection.

I created writing prompts that focused on not only what they were thinking about COVID-19 and the Illinois Stay at Home Order, but also asked them to take photos of what makes them happy or what their working spaces looked like. This gave them the opportunity to talk about their worlds, but it also let me see how many of my students actually had laptops or dedicated working spaces. (Surprise—most were working at kitchen tables or on their beds and had devices they were sharing with other family members attempting to work from home.) I kept these things in mind as I continued to make adjustments to writing activities and their final projects. Process and reflection became the most important parts of their work. Even if they could not complete what they would have been able to if they were on-campus, if they could tell me *how* they would go about completing it and *how* that changed in their current situation I felt they were seeing how rhetorical situations are in constant change and flux.

Teacher Education Candidates

My teacher education students needed reassurance. Suddenly the work they were doing in classrooms disappeared. They lost a connection to their students. They lost first-hand experience working with mentors. They lost something that they worked so hard for throughout their university careers. Some of this I couldn't give back to them. It was gone. Some of this needs the tears and frustration. But, I could reassure them that they had the knowledge and tools to move forward. And, we worked together to think about how this experience could impact their teaching in positive ways.

Because the second half of the semester has my final methods students completing two major projects—a practice edTPA based on their practicum classroom and an online social justice unit (small thanks to the universe that this was already in place)—I had to make some drastic changes to our curriculum once Illinois closed all face to face schooling. I add more elements to the online unit. We reviewed online teaching sources so students could have a collection of classroom resources. We looked at what secondary ELA teachers, such as Kelly Gallagher, were doing in their classroom to help students document their experiences.

Because these students were in such need of community, we started to meet weekly. Zoom classrooms are not always ideal, but it gave them the opportunity to see one another, talk about their work, and reinforce the writing and feedback they gave one another online. They were able to present ideas or ask questions to me prior to class and I was able to address them and share my thoughts and feedback with the larger group.

This group didn't text. Instead they sent emails. And, by emails I mean EMAILS. Emails asking if what they were planning would work for students, whether they were incorporating best practices, and if what they created could be used in a classroom.

What we all needed.

For both groups, deadlines went out the window. There was some writing I wanted to make sure they kept doing weekly— composition writing prompts and one-pages for my upper-division students—to make sure students were staying connected to the university and not drowning. I didn't reach all my students. Some of my first-year students disappeared after spring break when we moved to online learning. I gave out more incompletes this semester than most. I'm okay with that. As long as students communicated, we worked to figure out how best to help them get through this situation.

And, both groups learned how important writing is as a way to communicate, create community, and remain connected. They used writing to find their voices and to share their experiences. They used writing to make arguments, express concerns, plead their cases, and to say thanks. Even if they didn't realize it, they learned about audience and purpose and genre in very real ways that would not (and could not) have happened if we didn't have to create Pandemic Editions of our courses.

One of the most important things I did was send postcards. I have a stack of odd postcards from random places. As a zine creator/scholar and scholar who researches out-of-school literacies, I believe that writing is a form of activism, social justice, and a political practice. Writing is a way to build communities and citizens. And, one of the most important ways to teach writing is to be a writer. Usually this means that I write beside my students, show them examples of my work, and talk with them about process. In some ways, I was still able to do this through recorded videos and screencasts, but I wanted to find an authentic way to let students know that I valued their experiences. I did it through mail.

I asked students who wanted a postcard for their address. And, did I get a response. I sent postcards to at least three-fourths of my students. I wrote about the everyday things that connected me to them—basketball (and my love for Allen Iverson), *Supernatural*, the odd love of *The Great Gatsby* that English education students have that I don't share, their pets, music, Dolly Parton, books, and other inside jokes we shared as classes and as people. I told them that we're all in this together. And, most importantly, I told them that I cared. I did this as a writer and a human. I did this in the ways I want my English Education students

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to teach writing, with kindness and compassion, showing how writing can change the world in even the smallest ways.

I'm not sure what will happen in the fall. I don't know if we will go back to campus. I don't know if my first-year students who I asked to stop by my office and visit me will be able to do so. I don't know if the students who are going to student teach in the fall will have classrooms with walls to work with students in or if we will continue in a virtual world. But, there are some things I do know. I know that teaching writing means teaching students ways to think on paper (or screens). I know that writing can document history and preserve histories that may otherwise be lost. And, I know that of all the writing a did this semester, the most important writing wasn't in a classroom or for a committee or even for publication, it was the writing I did on postcards that went out to people who changed my life during this pandemic in big and small ways.

(If you want a postcard, let me know; they're not just reserved for students.)