Writing and Adapting Instruction During the Time of Covid-19

David Premont
Purdue University, dpremont@purdue.edu

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I have written about a kaleidoscope of experiences in my life in a personal journal for as long as I can remember. The events that surrounded those of Covid-19, of course, were no exception. In my journal, I composed about the virus itself, the breaking news that was hard to keep up with, and the events that had been drastically modified or cancelled because of it. I composed unanswerable questions that raced through my mind. I composed about the ways it affected me personally. When the officials in charge of the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s (NCAA) College Basketball decided to cancel the NCAA tournament, I knew the Covid-19 crisis was more serious than I thought. That, of course, led to more writing. In short, writing was the engine that powered critical thought and meaning-making at the start of the pandemic, like writing had been so many times in my life. However, I have not had much time to write since those first few moments as I was woefully unaware of the soon-to-be impact the virus would have on life as we knew it.

The Personal Impact of Covid-19

My wife works full-time in a position that necessitated her full attention once the pandemic became a reality. As a result, I was thrust into the role as the full-time caretaker to our two children who are both under two years old. The decision to remove them from their standard daycare was an easy choice to safeguard their health. However, it has had a significant impact on the writing and work that I am able to conduct. An overwhelming majority of the work I did during that time was focused on the student teachers I supervised and the class I was forced to teach remotely, which were squeezed in during the rare event that naptimes overlapped and/or after the kids went to sleep for the night. On top of that, there was the familiar desire to write about the way we adjusted to this new life and the way our children have grown. However, I found myself too exhausted to do much beyond the absolute necessary during a typical day of taking care of the kids throughout the early parts of the pandemic. Even this writing—with all the time constraints and responsibilities pulling me in multiple directions—I consider a labor of love because I believe in the power of writing. I believe in the power of writing to help me gain more insights into my own experience during the Covid-19 pandemic just as much as I believe in the power of community that writing elicits.

The spring of 2020 was supposed to be an important time for me personally. As a PhD candidate, I had worked tirelessly to prepare myself for and design a dissertation study, allowing me to research the influence that student teachers’ writer identities have on their writing instruction in secondary classrooms. I designed my study around the university’s
model for teacher candidates who conduct their student teaching experience during the spring semester from January to May. Ultimately, my data collection process started in the fall semester of 2018 and was supposed to culminate in the spring of 2020. The committee approved my plan to conduct multiple sets of interviews and to observe student teachers in the classroom in the spring of 2020 as part of this process. After deciding the main priority would be the welfare of my wife and kids, my thoughts immediately raced towards how the pandemic would influence my dissertation. I worried my plans had been compromised the moment Covid-19 began to overwhelm the country. My research hinged in large part on the classroom teaching of multiple student teachers, so when the pandemic caused school closures in mid-March, I worried that the data I had collected to that point would be incomplete—and thus insufficient in the eyes of my committee—given that the student teachers would complete their student teaching requirement online.

To add to that concern, I began to question the importance of my research amidst the global pandemic. Given the upheaval the virus caused in our routine—in everyone’s routine—I felt selfish continuing with my research, which would present an outcome that I questioned the importance of while people lost jobs, loved ones, and, in some cases, their sense of safety. Personally, I wondered if it was worth the sacrifice for my family. My wife has been more than gracious in finding me pockets of time in her work schedule for me to conduct interviews, code, and to write during her full-time employment. But was it worth all of that effort? Might it be easier for me to focus on taking care of the kids without the persistent thought that there was another email I needed to see, a review I needed to complete, or writing I needed to do? On top of that, I still worry that the complex nature of writing a dissertation will require me to spend more time away from my family in a time when they desperately need my support without standard childcare services available. Is writer identity (and ultimately my degree) that important to me and is it that critical to the field of English education that such a sacrifice is warranted? These questions have lingered in my mind more times than I’m willing to admit.

Moving Forward in the Wake of a Global Pandemic

As I wrestled with my own personal and professional writing, I held discussions with student teachers who posed difficult questions in the wake of an abrupt change to teaching remotely and/or expressed concern doing so. Having never taught an online course myself prior to the pandemic, this provided opportunities for me to more critically draw on many of my past experiences in education while also learning new strategies and ways of thinking and teaching. Immediately, I thought of the work Troy Hicks conducts as part of his digital writing expertise (Hicks, 2020), and how it might benefit my teaching or that of others.

The pandemic also offered opportunities to rethink standard teaching and learning practices. The current academic climate may allow teachers to approach teaching and learning without the traditional grading practices that may create undue pressure for students and provide opportunities for students to be more autonomous in their education. For instance, we can compare writing instruction in such a climate to that of one wanting to learn photography: when one wants to learn how to become a better photographer, the grade at the end of a self-selected course will mean little if their skills are not improved.
What the emerging photographer desperately wants is instruction on how to improve their ability to take high quality photos and timely feedback of the photos they take.

Of course, this metaphor is not a perfect fit given that secondary school and courses in English are compulsory, but it highlights that learning can flourish without the standard grading practices that we have come to live by. In an era when the educational climate demands that we alter traditional teaching practices, perhaps we can also alter the standard grading practices that accompany writing instruction as well. I envision opportunities where students can take more risks in their writing without the penalty that comes with “incorrect” style or tone, for example. I also envision students taking firm stances in their writing that reflect honesty in their beliefs and values without tailoring it to the erroneous assumption of what the teacher expects them to write. I also imagine teachers loosening their grip on the genres they believe school writing must be.

Specifically, I believe these writing and learning opportunities can lead to more authentic conversations about student writing through writing conferences. As a full-time teacher, few of the challenges I faced conducting writing conferences focused on how much time I was able to dedicate to each student, and how I could provide meaningful work for the students not immediately participating in the conference. Holding writing conferences remotely may present more flexibility in both the length of the conference and possibilities for independent student work. As such, remote teaching opportunities may be more ideal to freely conduct writing conferences with secondary students than the traditional face to face classroom. These conversations can be driven by the students who have specific goals for improvement, or, if the student prefers, the teacher can drive the conversation by asking holistic questions such as what about the writing the students are most proud of or where they feel they struggled in their writing. Such opportunities can lead to ideas for revision where both the teacher and student can set direct goals to address for their next conversation.

If future scenarios present similar circumstances where remote learning is necessary, I envision teachers inviting students to create and participate in writing groups digitally in ways similar to how writing groups function in face to face settings, especially if classroom sizes are too large to accommodate individual conferences. Designing and implementing student writing groups can also lead to more autonomy and genre exploration. Teachers can invite students to bring personal writing, but they can also offer prompts that may help them think through the moments they are experiencing. For instance, teachers can invite students to consider (a) composing their dreams for what the world looks like in the future; (b) writing a letter from a future perspective, describing the events that unfolded when a problem was not addressed; and (c) creating a plan that includes the work they and others must do in order to facilitate change in the present (Sherry, 2018). Such writing opportunities stand to help students become more critical and prepared to participate in the rebirth of the world and its return to normalcy.

In these instances, students can let their groups know if they want specific help in developing ideas, creating their message, or if they are simply speaking from their heart. To that end, I believe this is an opportunity for teachers to communicate to students that writing in school does not always have to follow the rigid expectations that accompany
traditional school writing, but instead can be meaning-making exercises. In these circumstances, teachers can even join the online group and participate in the writing conference, discussing student work and sharing pieces of their own writing as well.

**Conclusion**

Teaching in the time of Covid-19 has presented more challenges than most anticipated seemingly overnight. The disruption that has occurred not only in our schools, but also in our lives is authentic. Just a few short months ago teachers were asked to move their courses online with little notice and to continue as closely to normal as possible. If future conditions demand that we return to remote learning once again—whether it be for a week, a month, or indefinitely—I hope teachers feel more confident and capable in doing so. I recognize that the possibilities for writing instruction presented in this article are only possible under the best of circumstances for both teachers and students. However, I believe such practices, if possible, can help students become better writers and participate in authentic writing conversations despite not being able to meet face to face. As we look towards the future, my hope is that we surround ourselves with compassion, resources, and positivity that continue to elevate students despite the conditions we cannot control.

**References**
