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Embracing the Pivot in a Graduate Course: Stitching a New Garment

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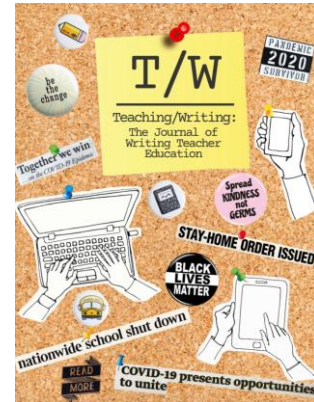


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Cover Page Footnote

I thank the 12 Eastern Michigan University Bright Futures teachers, site coordinators, and administrators who helped me rethink my own role as teacher during this time.

Embracing the Pivot in a Graduate Course: Stitching a New Garment



Cathy Fleischer *and the teachers, site coordinators, and administrators of EMU Bright Futures*

And so we began:

For the second year in a row, I had an opportunity to adapt a National Writing Project workshop into a credit-bearing course specifically designed for teachers, site coordinators, and administrators from Eastern Michigan University Bright Futures. EMUBF is an after-school program in southeastern Michigan that has forged alliances with three economically challenged school districts, and focuses on social emotional growth in addition to math, reading, writing, and health. The course, Entitled Teacher as Writer, immersed the participants in their own writing in order to think about what it means to be a teacher who writes. As I explained in the course description:

How does the experience of writing help you understand your own teaching better? How does it help you relate to your students and their writing? How might writing help you change the narrative surrounding teaching? Help others understand an issue more fully? Change the conditions of your teaching and education in general?

Designed as a “web-enhanced” course, we met for three hours every other week and shared writing through a series of scaffolded assignments over the semester. The final goal was for each participant to select an individual educational issue that mattered to them, research and write about that issue, receive feedback on their writing from colleagues, and, finally, create a piece—in any genre—that would be meaningful to them, create new understandings for others, and, hopefully, lead to change. The writing they produced was important, of course, but their experience of writing and their reflection on what that experience meant for their own pedagogy was the real topic of the course.

As the semester progressed, these adult learners’ investment in their topics grew: they all chose meaningful topics to explore—from Andrea’s exploration into the balance between vulnerability and leadership, to Molly’s question of how to help students use social media and technology in a manner that would spark creativity, to Pam’s deep dive into the benefits of recess and play, to Parish’s question of effectiveness of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion training. As they searched for the just-right genres and audiences for their work, they shared their writing experiences with each other—their fears and successes, their writing blocks and breakthroughs, their hesitations and strategies. Their honesty and support of others was truly breathtaking, and I looked forward to seeing their final writing create big changes in their worlds and beyond.

And then came the pivot:

And then came March 16. Like every teacher reading this piece, my struggle to keep the course meaningful and do-able increased as each day passed. I grappled with figuring out what the class would even mean in this time, at first asking myself what assignments, what content, what practices I needed to keep for it to still “count” as a graduate course. But I also wrestled with what that notion of “count” even meant in these times: What would it mean for these students, these adult learners, to complete the course? What should become my priority?

My first inclination was to just keep the course mostly the same: after all, this was a web-enhanced class and we could simply shift to doing the rest of the term online. Problem solved. But my lack of understanding about the repercussions of such a decision became clear almost immediately. My students were adults who were scared for their own health and the health of their families. They were also teachers who worried about the health, isolation, and food insecurity of their students and their students’ families. They were grieving their loss of contact with their students and the chaos of others’ lives. And all of them were figuring out how to sustain any kind of normalcy during this time: from being present for their own children at home to sharing physical space and Internet access with partners and spouses. Suddenly, these writing topics that had seemed so important to them (and to me) took a back seat.

I reached out, again and again, to EMUBF Director Lynn Malinoff during this time, calling upon her knowledge of the group and her wisdom in creating a program steeped in the values of social emotional learning. Lynn (who also was a student in the course) taught me this:

In our EMUBF world, youth voice is foundational to our youth development work. In this unknown space of Covid-19, the staff had a way to find their voices and raise them individually and together. If we are to engage youth voice, we must engage our own voices. We needed the mutual support and the safety of this course to raise our voices while being vulnerable and real, curious, fearful, and empowered. We were alone, together.

I listened, I learned, and we pivoted. Through zoom meetings, group emails, and individual conversations, I encouraged everyone to keep writing, but to shift their writing toward something that would be meaningful to them during this time. For some, this could mean to stay with their topic and not abandon the research they had done, but to think about it differently. For others, this could mean moving to a totally new topic. This permission to pivot captured the exigency of the moment and also gave teachers the agency to make decisions based in their own circumstances. But I came to realize it also captured a slightly realigned version of the original goals of the course—a realignment that made perfect sense for this moment. What if we reimagined the goals with the added phrase *during this time*? In other words: How does the experience of writing *during this time* help you understand your own teaching better? How does it help you relate to your students and their writing *during this time*? How might writing *during this time* help you change the narrative

surrounding teaching? Help others understand an issue more fully? Change the conditions of your teaching and education in general?

What happened

At first, this decision to pivot relieved some students, but didn't lessen the stress for others. One student made the decision to move several states away to be with her family and fell out of contact for a while. One dealt with both a spouse and small children who became quite ill (thankfully, not from COVID) and, while she tried to keep up, just felt herself falling behind—which added even more to her anxiety. Another just couldn't focus and force herself to work on a topic that seemed less important during this moment. Others struggled with sharing living and working space with their families, helping their own children with online learning, keeping present for the at-risk students they taught, and maintaining their own balance. But as I tried to reach out to each student, I kept repeating this mantra: *Make this course work for you. Write what you need to write. Find meaning in the pivot.* And ultimately, each student did—in different ways that fit their own circumstances and contexts—each eventually producing stunning pieces of writing that shifted, some slightly and some dramatically, from their original intentions.

Andrea, for example, describes the shift in her work on the topic of vulnerability among teachers mostly in terms of genre and purpose: from an academic paper to a found poem that arose from her careful listening to her fellow teachers and friends: “As the Pandemic unraveled, I gained a certain urgency to not only live in the present moment, but write about the here and now as it became increasingly difficult to discuss the uncertainty of the future,” she explained. “I felt doing so was doing injustice to what was occurring now and the many stories that were shared in the space I held for those in my life.”

Molly's pivot reflected a reconsidered stance into her research into adolescents, creativity, and technology/social media: “I completely changed not only my approach, but my beliefs around adolescent creativity. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and shutdown, our ‘worlds’ had to go online, and the people who were most experienced and best fit to lead this shift, were the adolescent population . . . Adolescents are using technology and social media in incredibly creative ways, it just took a pandemic for the adults in their life to recognize it as not a waste of time.”

R.J. shifted genre as he moved from his intent to create a series of informative blogs on the topic of vicarious trauma to the start of a dystopian short story about kids and school, set 40 years after the pandemic. “When I started, my piece wasn't meant to replace the original project; I was simply writing for fun. But the writing began to consume me. I was less enthusiastic about writing blog posts. I just wanted to focus on this one piece, and do it well. Also, it felt really good to be so emotionally invested in writing again. “

In order to share the essence of their final pieces, we initially had planned an in-person poster presentation. As part of the pivot, we instead decided to share short 10-minute presentations over Zoom, focused on both the process they used and product they created through their endeavors. We watched Parish's imaginative and impactful TEDx Talk about the shifts needed in diversity training, a carefully crafted video that combined his own

experiences with the research he had done. We watched Pam's reimagining and repurposing of her research into the value of recess and the outdoors for kids to a photo-journal of nature walks during pandemic, designed to be shared some day with her young daughters (and presented from the bathroom of her house, the only quiet spot during our Zoom session). Throughout these (and ten other equally moving) presentations, colleagues alternately cheered, cried, and filled the chat box with messages of support.

So what do I take from all this? And what do I hope those members of the class take from this? I think of myself as a teacher who has always been primarily concerned with the individuals in front of me—a concern that took precedence over content or outcomes or assessment rubrics. I pride myself as being a colleague in learning with my students and as a flexible thinker who adjusts my agenda to meet their needs. But what I imagined about myself was seriously challenged when the ground shifted, and I was surprised by how much I felt I had to hold onto an inexplicable something in order to make the course “count.” Standards. Expectations. Class participation. Deadlines. (The list goes on and on.) I truly have had to rethink both who I am as a teacher and what I want to help other teachers understand about their role—not only during a pandemic, but as an integral part of what it means to be an educator during any time.

During this time, my social media accounts kept pointing me to a quote from Sonya Renee Taylor about this time, a quote I now have framed next to my desk:

We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given an opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature.

I love that metaphor and I have been thinking about how, after 40 years of teaching, this class, this moment, this pandemic, will help me restitch a garment that I thought fit me well. My new garment will contain swatches of different fabric, vibrant colors, strong but flexible thread, and a new style: It will include authentic listening, honest questions, purposeful adaptations, continued flexibility, gestures of kindness, and—most of all—grace. And it will always include the phrase *during this time*, a recognition that not only is every time unique, but that time is merely a construct that bears constant rethinking and constant revision. We should not, we cannot, long to return to the old ways.