




2020

Looking Forward, Looking Back: Reflections on Values and Pedagogical Choices During Covid-19

Susanna L. Benko

Ball State University, slbenko@bsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte>

 Part of the Language and Literacy Education Commons, and the Secondary Education and Teaching Commons

Recommended Citation

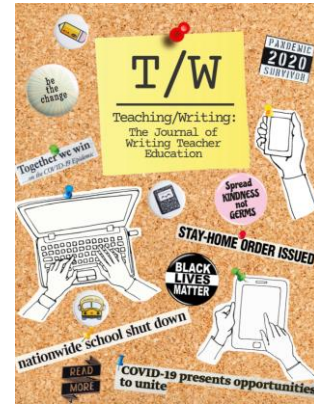
Benko, Susanna L. (2020) "Looking Forward, Looking Back: Reflections on Values and Pedagogical Choices During Covid-19," *Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte/vol9/iss1/19>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



Looking forward, looking back: Reflections on values and pedagogical choices during Covid-19



Susanna L. Benko, *Ball State University*

As a teacher educator, I've picked up influences from many places and carried them on my teaching journey.

In graduate school, I learned about Nel Noddings (2013), which helped me see the concept of care in a visible, tangible way—as something active, situational, intentional, and bi-directional. Her writing spoke to my heart and to ideas I valued as a classroom teacher: the importance of prioritizing relationships, developing people, and making the classroom a dialogic space. Discovering Noddings' work helped me link these values to a larger conversation, and helped me see that the act of caring was highly dependent upon the relationship between the person caring and the people being cared for. The act of caring was never a one-size fits all, nor was it the same time after time.

In graduate school, I also came across the work of Deborah Ball colleagues that focused on a practice-based approach to teacher education (e.g., Ball & Forzani, 2009; Grossman 2011). This work centered identifying practices fundamental to teaching and learning, and breaking down larger practices into smaller, namable parts. For example, TeachingWorks (2020), at the University of Michigan, has worked to identify “high leverage” practices such as leading a group discussion, eliciting and interpreting individual students' thinking, or building respectful relationships with students. Identifying practices central to teaching was transformative for me. The idea certain practices, like providing feedback on student work, were teach-able, learn-able, and more than an “anything goes” approach helped give me confidence in designing my teacher education courses, knowing that it was important to organize and prioritize certain things that I felt would help my new teachers in early years.

Sometimes, I struggled with the notion of practice-based teacher education—it felt at odds with *something*, though I couldn't quite put my finger on what. Peter Smagorinsky and George Hillocks discussed the tension around the idea of “best practices” in ELA teaching in two essays in the same edition of *English Journal*. Smagorinsky argued that the field might focus less on “best practices” and more on “principled practices,” emphasizing careful, reflective practice, and providing structures for teachers to think about why certain methods worked (2009). Hillocks (2009) responded with an article titled, “Some practices

are clearly better than others and we had better not ignore the difference,” and argued that when we think about what works for student learners, rather than individual teachers, there are some practices that are better than others. In similar way, sometimes notions of care and high-leverage practices felt contradictory for me terms of emphasis—one emphasizes relationships and people; the other emphasizes practices. It was a tension I saw and recognized, but I did not know how to reconcile.

In Spring 2020, I was finishing my eighth year at Ball State University. In what became the Covid-19 semester, I was teaching a course called Teaching Writing in Secondary Schools, a course for sophomores/juniors who want to become English teachers. It is the first of two methods classes that they take in their programs. We often have some interactions with middle school writers, usually at the end of the term, as a way of putting concepts into practice. Spring 2020 was kind of a wild semester from the start. Our partner teacher’s unit where my students could work with hers happened in late January, only three weeks into our semester. So, the first two weeks became a crash-course in think-aloud protocols and writing conferences, and then we were off to work with our middle school students. The rest of the semester continued in the same whirlwind fashion, and the first week of March brought spring break, which was a welcome opportunity to catch our collective breath. We returned on a Monday, and by Wednesday of that same week, faculty and students learned that we’d move online for the last six weeks of the term. We had one last face-to-face session before everyone scattered. My students returned to their apartments in Muncie, then, eventually to their homes across Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, and even France. A small silver lining was that Ball State decided to go online for the remainder of the semester right away; I was grateful to have a clear way to plan, rather than holding on to the possibility of returning to campus. But, our turnaround was quick: I saw my students on Thursday and was expected to have our course remote by the beginning of the following week.

Moving online at the end of the term—and doing it *so fast*—forced me into making decisions without being able to critically examine my choices as I made them. First, I had to decide what in our last six weeks was essential. I knew I couldn’t re-create our experience together in the same way, and I knew I couldn’t make it through everything I had originally planned. I had to ruthlessly essentialize, and there was no time for second guessing. We were reading a practitioner book about grammar; I had planned to read most of the text and do some practical applications. I knew I couldn’t fit it all in online, so I started deciding what could stay, what must stay, what my students needed to stay (in a whole-class sense). I ended up selecting several chapters that I thought were the most ground-covering, and read closely with the students one chapter focusing on the role of subjects and verbs in a sentence. Then, students picked choice chapters based on a self-assessment of their own grammatical needs. I made modules – two were single weeks, and two were two weeks each. For each module, I found that students clung to clarity. I provided to-do lists to accompany each module that tracked each item that they needed to accomplish, including reading assignments, short responses, discussion boards, etc.

Everything was asynchronous. (I wish I could say this was a choice that I made in the best interest of my students as the top priority. I was confident that asynchronous teaching would be useful for them and help them work at a time that was best for them, but I also must admit that this choice was largely because of timing and constraints on my end. I taught from 12:30 – 1:45 PM, and my three young children were out of school/daycare. With a working partner, there was no way I could be sure that I would be available at *any* specific time of day, let alone the transition from end-of-nap to story-and-nap time!)

I worked to make these changes, and I did so with the kindest heart I've ever had as a teacher. I told students that all deadlines were negotiable. Above all, I emphasized communication – I wanted students to check in with me, let me know what they needed, and tell me how I could help, if I could help. Assignments were still required, but I tried to be flexible and meet students where they were. I've always advocated for choice and ownership in my assignments, but found myself doing so even more radically. For instance, we had one final reflective essay that fell when we moved online. In our pre-pandemic lives, these reflections asked students to review Twitter and our course hashtag, look back on their learning about concepts from the past 4 weeks, identify a few key learning moments, and write about them. I wasn't sure if this was still the right way for them to think about their learning, so I gave students two very different options. Option A was to do as we'd always done, drawing on posts in Canvas and/or Twitter. Option B was totally different, using writing prompts from Anne Whitney's lovely blog post "The Gift of Offering Nothing" and asking students to reflect on where they were in the moment amid their Covid-19 contexts. In my mind, both options served a similar pedagogical purpose—having students reflect on their thinking and learning. Option A was reflecting on their learning in the course; Option B was reflecting on their learning in their lives. Nothing was off the table in terms of accommodations—I told students to ask for whatever they needed. Two-thirds of my students choose Option B, and most of them were grateful for a space to process what they were living. One student said that it was an opportunity to re-think the importance of space, in general—she said that some people think about an empty space as space needing filled, and that the assignment helped her realize that giving students an empty space can be a gift. "It's not nothing," she told me. "It's kind of everything." Someone told me people love to look forward and plan for the future, but looking backwards and reflecting is a useful way to connect dots and see a bigger picture that may not have been clear in the moment. This short essay is my attempt to connect just a few dots about my values as a teacher and how they worked together in practice. I hated the way that the term ended insofar as the stress and panic of pandemic. But I don't hate my pedagogical decisions, even though they were hastily made. Could they have been better? Definitely. But, I think I focused on the right things with relative integrity and clarity, and did so while keeping my students' needs centered. From my appreciation of a practice-based approach to teaching, I made hard decisions about where to focus and what to set aside in this short time frame. From my appreciation of Noddings, I made these decisions in a way that centered my relationships with my students, in dialogue with them, and considering their needs as a central factor.

Looking back, I'm thinking that pedagogical ideas that don't seem ideologically aligned are not necessarily impossible opposites, even if they may seem like it. In thinking of these two specific examples about care and practices, they *are* different, but their differences were important for my decision making. In the end, it wasn't a question of either/or with these concepts; they were helpful in different ways. It's easy to set up dichotomies or to pit ideas against each other, but I see now the usefulness in different influences, ideas, and values. Going forward, I can focus on the idea of "and"—on holding space for many ideas, even if they are not immediately complimentary—and trust that things will come together in ways that I may not expect and may not be able to articulate until sometime later. Pandemic teaching forced me to make fast decisions. Looking back, I can see that these decisions were guided by research that I value, and as a teacher, I hope I put them together in a way that was good for my students. As I look ahead to a future so full of uncertainties in my professional and personal life, I will use this this experience to remind me that my values were a useful guide in my decision making, and I can trust that they will continue to be the same for whatever comes next.

References

- Ball, D. L., Forzani, F. M. (2009). The work of teaching and the challenge for teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 60(5), 497–511
- Grossman, P. (2011). Framework for teaching practice: A brief history of an idea. *Teachers College Record*, 113(12), 2836-2843.
- Hillocks, G. (2009). Some practices are clearly better than others, and we had better understand the differences. *English Journal* 98(6). 23-29.
- Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*, 2e. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Smagorinsky, P. (2009). Is it time to abandon the idea of “best practices” in the teaching of English? *English Journal* 98(6). 15-22.
- TeachingWorks (2020, June 1). High-leverage practices. Teaching Works.
<http://www.teachingworks.org/work-of-teaching/high-leverage-practices>
- Whitney, A. (2020, April 9). The gift of offering nothing. *National Council of Teachers of English Blog*. <https://ncte.org/blog/2020/04/gift-offering-nothing/>