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### When Everything Changes Over Night: What We Learned from Teaching the Writing Practicum in the Era of Covid-19

Christina Saidy

Arizona State University at the Tempe Campus, [christina.saidy@asu.edu](mailto:christina.saidy@asu.edu)

Thomas Sura

West Virginia University, [thomas.sura@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:thomas.sura@mail.wvu.edu)

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workshops: (1) A full day focusing on transitioning from teaching the 101 course to the 102 course, and (2) a half day focusing on teaching online and in condensed six-week summer courses.

As teacher educators, we are regularly reminded that many new TAs have parallel experiences with their first-year students. Therefore, the move online raised many questions for both us and the TAs. How do we continue serving students? How do we meet as a class? How do we modify assignments? Do we modify assignments? How do we make sure our students are OK in this time of instability? We also had questions about our own ability to get all this work done, teach well, and be supportive mentors while we both worked at home with two elementary school children learning online as well.

In each case, the university leadership provided some of those answers. Christina's Writing Program Administrator (WPA) decided that all undergraduate writing courses would primarily meet asynchronously. In Tom's case, the students' spring break was extended to two weeks so that instructors could plan to move their courses online. Both universities' technology offices provided workshops for faculty over the break on things like teaching with Zoom, using Canvas and Blackboard effectively, and making screencasts. In her practicum, Christina had required the TAs use Canvas for their courses, so she knew they were not starting from scratch. Likewise, in Tom's program new instructors were trained using the institution's digital tools, so they were already familiar with many of the practical tools for teaching online. Yet, we both still knew there would be many questions and many needs as we moved online. In reflection, we realized our attention centered on three key areas: asynchronous learning, communicating differently, and building community.

### *Asynchronous Learning*

For Christina's group, the existing Canvas courses opened opportunities for the TAs to work together to enhance their current content. Since the TAs had been working in small groups all year, Christina had each of the groups focus on one particular aspect of instruction: facilitating peer review and feedback; supplementing instruction with media such as screencasts, videos, and links to resources; and modifying assignments. The small groups worked together on Zoom, created a Google doc sharing their recommendations, and then reported back to the large group. Christina encouraged the TAs to remember that less was more in this teaching situation, and that they should consider what their students really needed to complete to do well. Further, the Canvas site for the practicum served as a model for how the TAs might enact this change. The leadership team enhanced their Canvas site by adding videos, discussion boards, and using the peer review function in Canvas. This allowed the TAs an opportunity to practice using some of the Canvas features as students before they employed them as teachers. Together they learned they did not like the peer review feature in Canvas, that students preferred short video explanations or lessons to longer online readings, and that moving to an emergency online format required readjusting how they thought about teaching writing.

In Tom's program, asynchronous learning became essential for emergency remote teaching and teacher preparation, especially since students, faculty, and even administrators were grappling with new realities working from home. When his university suggested that

regular class time become office hours and that instructors not schedule meetings at other times for fear of overwhelming the institution's servers, Tom could not comply. 9:30 meetings on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays was impossible as his family juggled his spouse's impromptu conference calls, his children's school Zoom meetings, and his now laborious trips to the grocery store clad in a mask and gloves. Tom's students reported similar scenarios like not having a quiet place to do schoolwork or picking up extra shifts at their jobs because they needed the money. Everyone needed extra flexibility. One thing that made the transition to asynchronous learning easier, that Tom shared broadly through the program, was using shared Google Doc lesson plans as a course convention. Pre-pandemic, this enabled students to follow along during class and see what they missed after class if they were absent. When the pandemic struck, very little had to change. Tom continued to post three lessons each week, and students knew where to find the information, what to do, and how to do it on their own time.

### *Communicate Differently*

In a face-to-face teaching setting, teachers often check in with students to gauge their understanding and overall well-being, but this was more complex in remote teaching. In response, Christina used her practicum communication as a model for how TAs might communicate with their own students. To this end, Christina sent each message in at least two ways: an email through our university's class roster email and an announcement on Canvas. The message was the same, but sent through two different channels to guarantee everyone had access. Early on, a few of the TAs thanked Christina both for the clarity of the messages and the modeling. Further, when TAs would miss a Zoom class, Christina would follow up with them via email and check on their well-being. They often thanked me for checking in and shared what was going on in their lives – illnesses, family challenges, struggles with isolation, etc. These check-ins helped the TAs in communicating with their own students.

For Tom, flipping the classroom played a vital role in communicating differently. Tom used QuickTime daily to quickly produce screen recordings for students and other instructors, which ultimately led to a new classroom genre in his pedagogy—the video walkthrough. While walkthroughs are a common genre in spheres like gaming, Tom adapted them for remote teaching by recording walkthroughs of everything from course lessons, to citing sources, to structuring sections of essays. The practice proved useful and practical enough that the rest of the undergraduate writing leadership also practiced creating videos for teacher development, offering walkthrough videos on subjects like setting up courses in Blackboard as well as designing and implementing online lessons.

### *Building Community*

One of the most important reflections to emerge from this experience for Tom was thinking about community on various scales. Seeing the teachers in the undergraduate writing program so concerned for their students' success and well-being was inspiring but also sobering. There was a sense that instructors felt a responsibility to have all of the answers for all of the students all of the time although so much of what they were contending with was beyond the scope of an undergraduate writing course. For example, an instructor might

ask, “What do I do if a student doesn’t have internet access at home?” The answer that Tom supplied more than once was, “Let us know so we can communicate that to the university administration. That’s an issue they must help solve.” In essence, Tom found himself reminding instructors that their classroom communities were part of a larger university community and that everyone was invested in our students’ learning and success.

For Christina, one of the great rewards of facilitating the practicum and mentoring new TAs was seeing them grow together as teachers in a supportive community. In the practicum, they tried to maintain a sense of community by meeting weekly on Zoom and frequently using the breakout room feature for small discussion. The TAs continued to respond to the writing of fellow TAs via peer review and discussion boards. One group even led discussion on Zoom. But maintaining community was difficult. Many TAs lived alone, and they felt isolated. While they stayed connected to the practicum, they missed each other. The group who led discussion struggled with leading a discussion on Zoom, and it turned out much more like a lecture. Most importantly, the TAs struggled to connect with their students. Some first-year writers never made the transition to online classes. The community aspect of both the practicum and the teaching of first-year writers proved most challenging and spurred Christina to reach out to Tom to share experiences.

### *Thinking About Fall*

While Spring 2020 was overwhelming and exhausting, we were both so heartened by the ways that the new TAs in our programs responded to the challenges of moving to emergency remote teaching. As writing teacher educators, we learned much from their questions, their flexibility, and their commitment to students. Yet, writing teacher educators often become isolated working with their practica groups and leadership groups often not moving beyond their institutions. This situation was magnified by the pandemic. As we worked quickly to transition our own classes, help TAs transition their classes, and simultaneously maintain our own family lives, it was hard to see beyond the current moment. Taking the time to talk to each other about what we had experienced and what we learned from it benefitted us both.

At the time of this writing, our universities have not yet announced concrete plans for the fall. Christina’s university plans to be face-to-face, but what that looks like is still under consideration. Tom’s university has also committed to face-to-face instruction, but the writing program is moving ahead with a hybrid model where course learning is online but office hours are face-to-face. No matter the format, we will approach fall 2020 based on our takeaways from this spring: focusing on asynchronous learning, communicating differently, and building community in new ways.

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