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## Building and Maintaining Sanctuary Spaces through Face to Face Writing Assessment

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In their OpenEd2020 Keynote, Maha Bali and Mia Zamora introduced a visualization that shows the need for both systemic equity and personalized care to build the most identity-affirming, justice-seeking classrooms possible. Bali and Zamora's equity-care matrix reveals that when equity, care, or both are absent from our classrooms, it is impossible for instructors to build responsive environments that students need and want.

Be Oakley (2018) encourages readers to dream about sanctuary spaces and provides some clues to what spaces marrying equity and care might look like. The idea of sanctuary is self-defined, where each of us can experience safety and comfort on our own terms. This might require us to push back against institutional demands for efficiency, quantity, and data gathering to attend to the granular, individualized needs of each student in a particular moment to ensure that they feel cared for and comfortable. This is easier said than done: equitable, caring sanctuary spaces are vital, but they aren't naturally occurring.

Building and maintaining sanctuary requires hospitality, especially in virtual settings where human connection and community building are critical to learning. There are many definitions of hospitality, but Imad (2020) asks us to consider how, as hosts, instructors make space for students socially, emotionally, and academically. Students should be able to be their fullest selves in our spaces,

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physical or virtual, but such authenticity means decentering ourselves and our content--and recentering the collective and individual needs of students-- even with 150 students logging into Zoom each day. Teaching 100 percent of our content in 50 percent of the time with 25 percent of the human interaction is not equitable, caring, or responsive. However, we have found that the use of face-to-face assessment has allowed for hospitable consideration of students' unique needs.

### **The Basics of Face-to-face Assessment**

While this section will mostly detail how face-to-face assessment works, some initial grounding is needed. First, we acknowledge that in our classrooms, when we assess a draft, we have already seen multiple steps leading up to it: initial outlines, rough drafts, and peer-review drafts. Some of us have asked students to metacognitively reflect on final submissions with Giles's (2010) "Letter to the Reader," which has students describe revision choices ahead of the face-to-face assessment. We are not reading each draft cold (though, if we were, we could still envision value in the face-to-face elements). Norms and expectations--perhaps co-created--are accompanied by reflection about students' writing and formative assessment. In other words, F2F assessment is not only about the final product and grade; it is a culminating conversation informed by previously ongoing conversations about a writers' process and progress.

Second, F2F assessment provides an opportunity for students to celebrate their writing, justify their rhetorical moves, and reflect on their process and progress. While each of our practices is different, there are common elements to face-to-face assessment. In each meeting:

- we review the draft (our own practices vary in the extent of review);
- we reflect on key questions (What are you proud of in this draft? What still needs work?), discussing trends in improvements and shortfalls;
- we reach a consensus on what grade the draft should receive.

It is through F2F assessment that students practice ownership of and agency in their writing experiences.

### **Weighing the Advantages of F2F Assessment**

F2F assessment requires considerable time and effort, but we find that the benefits far outweigh the costs. Since enacting F2F assessment in our writing classrooms, advantages include:

- Making assessment pleasurable. In our old, pre-F2F assessment lives, the stack of papers traveled from classroom to kitchen table, filling us with dread. We wrote extensive comments, some more frustrated as time wore closer to midnight. We weren't sure our comments were being read, understood, or generalized to the next writing project. Our comments

represented “fake” writing: writing in response to inauthentic prompts as we projected feedback to an imaginary, hostile, or confused audience. With F2F assessment, there is no question whether our feedback is being received, because the audience is in front of us.

- Saving time and prioritizing relationships. We could spend just as much time - if not more - writing comments on student work; however, building relationships with students while simultaneously providing feedback is a two-for-one benefit. While traditional grading can erode the teacher/student relationship, F2F conversations ensure that students are present and have opportunities to discuss academic workload, family issues, and other stressors. For many students, our class may be the only one in which their instructor knows who, or how, they are.
- Ensuring that students receive and understand impactful feedback. In traditional grading situations, students struggle to understand our feedback. They may also be hurt by our comments or overwhelmed with how many changes are suggested. When we assess F2F, students ask questions, clarify why they made revisions, and float suggestions about improvements, showing their thinking about writing. Through such conversations, there are opportunities to assess that the student actually does understand an issue or know the way forward and has thus met a particular learning outcome. In this way, writing assessment becomes the multi-path, “multi-vocal, synergistic conversation” described by Corbett (2010).
- Sharpening empathy. When we rage-grade, one poor essay puts us in a bad mood, then another, until we are not in a good place to give fair feedback. We have also speed-graded piles of essays, only to collect the next pile. F2F assessment enables us as more empathetic feedback-givers. The tone and the way in which feedback is provided takes into account that we are working - in real time - with other human beings, not just words typed on a paper.
- Building feedback abilities. F2F assessment allows for grounded feedback on drafts, pointing to specific positives and negatives--modeling a more productive way for students needing to improve peer review skills.
- Being the change we wish to see. In our methods courses, using F2F assessment has a double benefit: it models the kind of assessment we hope our preservice teachers will find meaningful and thus adopt for their future classrooms. In this way, F2F assessment is legacy work.

### **Considering the Disadvantages of F2F Assessment**

The “disadvantages” for F2F assessment that we have outlined below may not so much be considered challenges or obstacles to our teaching practices, but rather,

invitations to rethink the way we spend time in our classrooms and the educational surveillance of which we might let go. Considerations include:

- Time constraints. Time and investment are required to make F2F assessment a natural part of our teaching practices and our writers' learning experiences. Planning for F2F assessment is not just "another thing to add on" but rather "part of the process, the thing that we're making time for," because F2F assessment is a student-centered practice that demystifies grading, creates dialogue, and invites students to take ownership and pride in their writing. We can abandon the proverbial red pen and instead frontload goals and success criteria for our students' writing, explicating and discussing the purpose of F2F assessment and expectations. This is a goal worthy of our time.
- Grade inflation. Assessing work F2F means that sometimes a student's hopefulness for an A grade right in front of us (or a student's tears of frustration) could persuade us to inflate their grade. In our experience, we have found that inviting students toward one more revision, post-assessment, invites honesty when we ask, "Knowing that you have an opportunity to revise this piece for a revised grade, how would you grade the piece in its current state?"
- The need to be vulnerable and let go. Dr. Brene Brown asserts that "Feedback should be as vulnerable for the person giving it as the person receiving it. You should have no idea what's gonna go down in that room." Having "no idea what's gonna go down" differs from the predictability of writing comments and assigning grades that students will read and receive later. Yet F2F assessment invites us to be transparent about our reactions, and it invites our writers to be transparent about their triumphs and failures. When our writers lead the conversation on what they are proud of and what still needs work, we may not be fully prepared for what they will say, but we can respond with care, empathy, and space for our writers to share and develop their voice.

### **Aca-pandemic Discoveries**

After shifting to online F2F assessment, the conversation is still the same, but now, the logistics have become more efficient, even friendlier. Meetings typically last for no more than 15 minutes. Students often show up in pajamas, lounging on couches with pets. We too, are often in our comfy pants, with coffee in hand and children wandering in the background.

For us, it is likely that F2F assessment will continue virtually, even when we return to in-person classrooms, because it is easier for students to join us from home (or work) and meet for 10-15 minutes. This option takes the added pressure off of students to come to our physical office space; it's more efficient, more

practical, and more effective. Teaching during a pandemic has forced all educators to rethink our practices, including practices that may have been convenient to us but, perhaps, inconvenient to students. We've rethought how spending time face-to-face can be easily replicated - to everyone's benefit - on a virtual platform.

When we ask our writers to start the conversation and reflect on how they would assess their writing, we let go of power, educational surveillance, and "cop shit," which Jeffrey Moro defines as "any pedagogical technique or technology that presumes an adversarial relationship between students and teachers." When we sit alone, red pen at the ready, surveilling what our writers did wrong, that's cop shit. If we are to implement F2F assessment, then, the practice requires us to reassess the kind of power we wield. Further, institutional norms and expectations still require us to submit a number or letter grade at the end of every semester. During the aca-pan-demic year, however, it became more acceptable to not "label" students with grades, as we received requests from our administration for more flexibility and grace with grading. Unfortunately, it may have taken a pandemic to get us closer to cutting the cop shit and instead prioritize conversation, care, and generative feedback over quantitative grades that fail to illustrate the rich and nuanced ways our students write.

When we came out of the other side of the pandemic term, some of us were praised by administrators for getting through the "triage" of abruptly transitioning to online classrooms. Those same administrators then signaled to us that while that term was considered triage, we educators would be expected to perform better and more careful "surgery" during the summer and fall terms. And yet, we are still in a pandemic, facing much uncertainty, with circumstances changing every day. This neverending triage created opportunities for us to reorient our teaching practices and consider ways in which we can prioritize care, especially for our most marginalized and vulnerable students, who have borne the brunt of this crisis. After all, triage is about placing those who need us the most at the front of the line.

### **Exiting the Tunnel of Excuses**

F2F assessment is how we build sanctuary into our classrooms, providing us with a vivid reminder about the dangers of thinking about students abstractly; they aren't numbers, letters, comments in the margins, or black boxes on a screen, they're people who, like all of us, are adjusting, pivoting, and dreaming. While F2F assessment remains a significant way to respond to students' academic needs, it also allows us to provide the social-emotional safety and connection students need to access academic learning (Imad 2020). At times, there is nothing inherently efficient or standardized about F2F assessment, and we may find that content coverage must give way, but there is something remarkably urgent about intentional, hospitable personal connection, especially in a pandemic.

Virtual learning has forced us to strip away the institutional and bureaucratic “stuff” and renew our empathetic focus on the students we teach; it has compelled us to build sanctuaries because, without equity and care, students are freer than they have ever been to mute, turn their camera off, or even leave. Changing the way our classrooms look is challenging--it takes imagination, courage, and perseverance--but we can't let the difficulty of change prevent us from humanizing our learning spaces. The tunnel of excuses is long, but if anything from our virtual endeavor is worth saving, it is a commitment to our students' humanity that a practice like F2F assessment can center.

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