Failure, Flexibility, and (Self-)Forgiveness: Authentic Modeling through Distance Instruction

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As a doctoral candidate and relative newcomer to teaching preservice English teachers, I was thrilled to have an opportunity to teach my university's writing methods course: Foundations in Teaching Writing. I had already taught two other courses required of our English education majors: Grammar and Writing (grammar methods) and Advanced Composition (rhetorical genre studies). All of these courses are housed in our English department, where I am completing my doctoral work in rhetoric and writing studies. My impetus for pursuing a PhD and entering the field of teacher education has always been to create more and better writing pedagogy learning opportunities for preservice and inservice English teachers; I left my career as a high school English teacher to research and understand the influences on novice teachers' writing pedagogy. And here I was, taking my place as one of those potential influences.

Not that everything was a fairytale: of the three classes for preservice English educators I had already taught, all were filled with chatty, inquisitive, motivated students. My Foundations students were inquisitive and motivated but almost dead silent during every class discussion. You know the adage in education that we must get comfortable with the uncomfortable silence in order to make room for student voices? Oof. I was practicing what I preached on the regular in this class. Students were animated and active in small groups, but whenever we had a whole-class conversation, the din of discussion died. It didn't take long for me to limit my use of class discussions in favor of other interactions that the students responded better to—turn-and-talks, small group share-outs, jigsaws, crowdsourcing in Google Docs and Slides—and we discussed the various methods, their affordances and limitations, and how students might employ similar measures in their own classes eventually. I wanted to model for my students the sort of flexibility they would need to employ in their own classes one day.

Little did I know that this would be the tip of the flexibility iceberg.

My university—like many other universities—announced a temporary transition to "distance learning" for all face-to-face and hybrid classes during the second week of March 2020. At that time, my students were starting their third project for the course: a writing unit design project that would have them not only developing unit and lesson plans, but also finding, designing, and revising supplemental instructional materials. I had had numerous workshops and peer review sessions planned for the complex and time-consuming requirements of the project, and now we were to accomplish much of the project (eventually all of it, of course) remotely. On March 12, our last face-to-face class session together, we discussed a basic game plan for distance learning, including an in-class trial WebEx meeting that allowed us to figure out our new meeting platform. Anxieties were high, but so were spirits. The next week was spring break, and I promised to adjust the next project to accommodate our new learning circumstances before we reconvened.

While making those adjustments, I realized that the writing unit project would require significantly more time since the in-class peer reviews and workshops would no longer be possible as originally designed. To open up our schedule, I eliminated the small final project of the course—one aimed at the importance of dispositions toward writing of both students and teacher in the writing classroom—and I streamlined the fourth project on responding to student writing. With one project eliminated and another truncated, I was able to stretch the large writing unit project over two more weeks, include ample time for individual video conferences and several peer review activities, and develop a few videos exploring various approaches to planning. I joined a Facebook group (Higher Ed Learning Collective) dedicated to supporting faculty making the transition to distance learning and aggressively skimmed a couple of chapters and articles about online writing instruction (Mick & Middlebrook, 2015; Lapadat, 2002). Based on those sources and my understanding of the widely varied needs of my students, I decided that with the exception of the one class video conference on the first day "back" from spring break, I would use asynchronous instruction in order to accommodate different schedules and needs. This, paired with my students' tendency not to talk in whole-group settings, seemed like the best way to proceed. I felt like I was successfully navigating all of the challenges of pandemic teaching: sure, there were sacrifices, but it would all be okay.

I sent my students a reminder, and we met collectively via WebEx on March 24. I walked them through the updated digital schedule with all its new links and resources for asynchronous learning, being sure to explain my rationale for the changes. As was the case in the physical classroom, they had little to say in the digital whole-class setting, so I arranged virtual office hours, reminded them to email any questions they had, and set us on our way.

The challenges started immediately. Few students took advantage of virtual office hours, but I received lots of emails asking for clarifications about project details and possibilities. The individual conferences went generally well, but I got the sense that in that strange digital space, many students were more reserved than they had been in person. Of my fourteen students, three didn't get conferences at all: two never signed up and the third scheduled, didn't show, rescheduled, and didn't show again. Peer reviews were similarly hit-and-miss. Although we had worked on peer review response strategies early in the semester and previous review opportunities had resulted in thorough, meaningful feedback, most students had now reverted to wholly encouraging (This is great! I wish I had written it!) or heavily hedged (Maybe you might want to perhaps consider…) responses that did little if anything to further their colleagues' revision process. In addition, because I had relaxed deadlines, a handful of students did not submit drafts for peer review in a timely manner and therefore got hurried, less complete feedback, if they got it at all. By the end of the second week of distance learning, when our university announced that remote learning would continue through the end of the spring semester, I realized that being wholly asynchronous was not working.

At that point, I needed to be vulnerable and honest: I had to tell the class that some of my revisions to the course were not working and my entirely asynchronous approach didn't meet everyone's needs. Prior to the pandemic, we regularly discussed the vulnerability of writing and the importance of creating a classroom environment to provide a safe space that encourages inevitable failures in our written work and works toward problem-solving dispositions: that is how we grow as writers (Brooke & Carr, 2016; Garcia & O'Donnell-Allen, 2015; Wardle, 2012). Teaching generally and teaching writing specifically requires us to embrace failure and be flexible enough to change course. Because my students would be certain to face their own failures in the classroom and would need to develop a supportive space for their students to fail in their writing to encourage their growth as writers, I knew that talking about my failure was necessary.

But this was uncomfortable. I've been a reflective, open educator for a long time, and I have gotten to a place where I am able to comfortably adjust to the needs of my students without feeling like a failure as a teacher. The adjustments have become a natural part of my teaching: when things don't work—like when whole-class discussions in this course went nowhere—you make an in-flight adjustment and keep moving. Although I regularly talked to my students about getting comfortable with and admitting their failures to their students as a means of humanizing themselves, my own failure this time felt different. It felt very much—for the first time in a long time—like I really didn't know what I was doing as a teacher. It wasn't me just making the regular adjustments to my classroom

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practices: it was me completely missing the mark. It made me remember my first difficult year of teaching, and in doing so, made me realize just how important the conversation with my students was.

So we had another WebEx meeting, and I laid it all bare: I knew I wasn't getting across everything the students needed in the videos and supplemental materials. It was hard to keep track of courses and coursework without the comfortable routine of going to class. I admitted that I relied on my ebullient nature in face-to-face classes to carry the content sometimes, and in this awkward new digital space, I couldn't lean so heavily on my excess of personality for creating engaging instruction. I told my students that I felt that I was falling short of what I expected of myself; I knew the feelings were part and parcel to the shift to distance learning and I owed myself the same sort of gentle understanding that I was giving my students, but I was having a hard time giving myself a break. "It's hard to feel like you don't know what you're doing and to realize that you feel that way because you legitimately don't know what you're doing," I said, "but it's important to keep making adjustments and forgiving yourself. You're going to feel that way sometimes, but this is how we learn."

That meeting went a little long, and I did most of the talking, but it was absolutely a turning point in the project and our distance-learning experience. As a class, we decided to streamline the fourth project even more from an intense experience in delivering student feedback to a lower-stakes opportunity to practice different strategies for responding to authentic, anonymized student writing. We extended a few more deadlines in the third project, discussed peer review, and decided to meet briefly once a week as a check-in and to make further adjustments if we needed to. We talked about how this experience made clear that they might want to include flexible spaces in their unit plans to accommodate possible disruptions to their teaching or to respond to student needs in the projects they were designing. At the students' suggestion, I agreed to send out a weekly announcement with all the links and deadlines for the week in it to help students stay on track. I set up a schedule of optional conference times, and several students took advantage of that opportunity, most of whom had never attended the virtual office hours.

The rest of the semester was not without hiccups, but it was significantly better. The weekly check-ins still had me doing much of the talking, but students regularly voiced concerns and questions, too. I also made a point in those meetings of admitting what was difficult for me in that week, where I was finding success as well as feeling failure, and the ways in which I was trying to be gentle with myself. Through my vulnerability and honesty about what I saw as failures, I was able to model the type of humanity I hope my students show with their students. Writing,

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after all, is an exercise in vulnerability and failure, and we cannot expect from our students what we cannot demonstrate ourselves.

Although my years of experience usually make it easier to adjust my instruction, the forced, rapid shift to distance instruction reminded me just how unsettling failure feels as a teacher. While it was difficult, it was also particularly important: without experiencing that discomfort, I could not have projected the same level of vulnerability because I would not have been so vulnerable. The failures of my transition were a gift to my teaching and allowed me to discuss the kinds of challenges my preservice teachers almost certainly will encounter as they begin their careers. I sincerely hope that they do not have to teach under pandemic-influenced circumstances, but now that they've seen an experienced educator working through failure openly and honestly, I hope they can be gentle with themselves as they exercise the flexibility required to teach writing.

T/W

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