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Groping Through a Grim Spring: Teaching and Learning During a Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic essay discusses the author's experiences and reflections on teaching and learning in a college town in the southern US in Spring 2020. What happens to faculty and students and the work of teaching and learning during an unprecedented event such as a pandemic? How do we work alongside the disruptions of everyday routines and suddenly navigate massive social change? The author describes some of the issues that a teacher and her students navigated personally and professionally during a semester of crisis precipitated by a global pandemic.

Keywords: higher education, teaching during social change, teaching online

February 25, 2020. I heard Dr. Nancy Messonnier of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) telling reporters that she had let her family know that the coronavirus would cause significant disruption to daily life. Yet, accounts of the virus seemed distant — there were not yet reported coronavirus cases in the US. But soon, cruise liners were locked down or unable to berth in ports around the world. Days later on March 1, the US reported 88 cases[1]. My students and I met on Friday March 6 at the Special

[1] Numbers of cases and deaths included were drawn from the *New York Times*, the CDCs and the Johns Hopkins COVID-19 tracker. Published numbers did not always align across sources.

Collections library. After class, I told the archivists with whom we had been working, "If something happens with COVID[2], we'll be able to work on-line after Spring Break."

And then it was Spring Break. Glorious days with the fragrance of blooming trees and vividly-hued shrubs. By March 9, 2020, there were 221 cases of COVID-19 reported in the country. Worldwide, health departments tallied 110,588 cases of COVID-19 and 3,841 deaths. The state university system announced that all classes would move on-line for the remainder of the semester. I was fortunate, since my class already mixed online and face-to-face activities. Rather than develop new materials, I re-arranged the schedule for the rest of the semester, taking in the two weeks' transition time that the university had allowed to move classes online. And suddenly we were all interacting online, working from home, and absorbing an influx of messages from university administrators, the Centers for Disease Control (CDCs), the COVID-19 Taskforce, and colleagues, family, and friends near and far.

College administrators encouraged faculty to assist students as much as possible. Students from across state institutions petitioned to move to a Pass/Fail grading system for the semester. The University System for the state outlined their position in a media statement that read: "In times of adversity, we should reach higher, not lower," and denied the students' request. I stopped deducting points for late submission of students' work and let them know to take whatever time they needed to complete tasks.

Six months later in mid-September, the case count for the US had risen to more than 6.6 million with over 197,000 deaths. In the intervening time, identified cases across the globe exploded to over 30 million, with more than 946,000 deaths. Predictions for eradicating the virus were bleak and reports of vaccine development mixed. Humans everywhere learned to live through a pandemic, to live in uncertainty. And still we kept learning. But what?

Learning extinguished, expedited, online

> There is danger everywhere, and it remains unspecified, so that we live in expectation of the catastrophe: a virus, of the organic or of the technological kind, or just the next computer crash (Braidotti, 2019, p. 13).

We quickly became familiar with a new language. Overnight we learned the difference between an "epidemic" and a "pandemic," how to "shelter-in-place", "social distance", and "flatten the curve." We learned how the coronavirus impacts the body, how to avoid contracting and spreading the virus, and an ever-growing list of symptoms of which to be vigilant. A

[2] The Centers for Disease Control uses the term SARS-CoV-2. I use COVID-19 throughout since this is the recognizable lay term

steady stream of emails arrived, notifying us of conference cancellations and opportunities denied. The day on which my students and I had planned a visit to the State and National Archives, we began observing shelter-in-place ordinances from local government instead.

My students attended newly scheduled synchronous online meetings. Several shared their feelings of isolation while living alone. One let me know that they had been diagnosed with COVID-19. I telephoned students who had not checked in. One wept. I posted resources assembled by the university's Counseling and Psychiatric Services to the whole class. And somehow we all finished the semester and I submitted grades. In our final class, a student asked if we could reschedule our missed field trip when the archives re-opened. I promised, "Of course!" — not knowing when.

My summer class preparation had begun early. I hesitated to schedule synchronous meetings for all. Students had told me about supervising their children's schoolwork, teaching their own classes online, and the challenges of managing everyday activities. I decided to meet students online individually and posted daily screencasts and comments for the class. In meetings, students and I shared shelter-in-place stories and discussed course topics and projects. Some students arranged synchronous meet-ups of their own and all participated in lively asynchronous discussions. There were jokes, explorations of misunderstandings, and generous feedback on others' work. It took the best part of two days each week to meet individually with my students. By the third meeting, we enjoyed off-topic conversations along with more serious business. Some meetings ran out of time. And it worked. I hoped that the bonds that students had developed with their peers would outlive the course and that they had drawn skills from the course to apply to their research projects.

Over the summer, administrators and a vast group of sub-committees across the state had weighed the options for re-opening the university. Media reported job losses at other institutions. Deans and department heads submitted plans for budget cuts. The university president expounded on the need to return to on-campus life, reporting that the university would follow the state guidelines. By September, two factions had solidified — those striving for business as usual versus those advocating for further steps to open campuses safely. Petitions circulated and people posted disparate views on social media. Newspapers posted daily tallies of the latest COVID hotspots – college campuses. Emails encouraged students to follow the university guidelines while rumors circulated that students were not. My lack of planning for travel to Europe for my research leave in the Fall emerged as foresight. I read reports that COVID-19 might be with us always, like measles.

Online teaching and learning during a pandemic

> What is positive in the ethics of affirmation is the belief that negative relations and passions can be transformed through an engagement in the collective practices of change. This implies a dynamic view of passions and affects, even those that freeze us in pain, horror or mourning. The ethical subject is the one with the force to grasp the freedom to depersonalize the event and transform its negative charge. (Braidotti, 2018, p. 222)

I started learning how to teach online 10 years ago. As I developed online resources for my classes, I experimented with online learning using a hybrid format. I read books, took workshops, and gained technical and practical expertise. By 2014, I was delivering fully online coursework. This Summer, my students gained more time and attention from me than they would have if we had met face-to-face. I learned more about each individual and their work than I could have had we met in person. This approach is not a recipe for others, nor should it necessarily be repeated. Spending a good part of six days by a standing desk meeting individually with my students emerged as the right thing to do when I began teaching through a pandemic. By the end of class, I was happy and exhausted with no regrets – although my writing schedule for submission of a book manuscript was thrown off schedule. My students and I shared our cares, concerns and anxieties. I learned that teaching and learning through a pandemic with daily reminders of our mortality can trigger acts of kindness, sharing and moments of hilarity, alongside fear and anxiety.

Karen Barad (2007) proposes the idea of *ethico-onto-epistem-ology,* or "an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing and being" as an approach to "knowing in being" (p. 185). As teachers, we might think about how our knowledge of how to teach and what matters is always entangled with our being, that of our students, and the non-human aspects of the world around us. We clearly need technical and practical expertise along with content knowledge in our disciplinary areas to teach in any context. Teaching through the COVID-19 pandemic, however, has required that teachers adapt to the circumstances in ways that reflect how, as relational beings, we are "defined by the capacity to affect and be affected" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 43). The COVID-19 pandemic is one event that will change each of our lives in ways that we have yet to understand. Many other events — including economic and environmental calamities —provide contexts in which we need to meet our students as humans in ways that intertwine ethics, knowing, and being. For example, this past Spring, my students and I were all exhausted: coping with work, school, home, family, and the realities of living through a pandemic with no end in sight, amidst disparate conflicting viewpoints concerning how to live going forward. Yet out of the conglomeration of content that included links and screencasts in the Learning Management System, the daily writing prompts and online

discussions, the shared exchanges, peer feedback and conversations in Zoom, squeezed in among a myriad of other daily tasks, there was a posthuman convergence that was "productive, dynamic and inter-relational" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 46).

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided teachers in higher education with a vivid reminder of the importance of reflecting on how teaching involves ethical decision making that flexibly orients to what we know, who we are as humans, and how non-human forces impact our everyday lives. Braidotti (2018) offers an ethics of joy in which self-interest and negativity are displaced by a collective process of "becoming-ethical" (p. 222). Although the work of teaching is constrained by institutional requirements for what gets taught as laid out in course syllabi and program plans, the acts of teaching and learning are always re-negotiated in the here-and-now, and must always orient to what matters in specific contexts. For me, teaching through a pandemic has highlighted the ethical work of teaching that inspires creative decision-making for the collective good. For teachers elsewhere, other events taking place provide points of focus for reflection to inspire actions that matter in classrooms with students.

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