

Collecting Dissertation Data During COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This essay describes my personal experience as a doctoral candidate collecting data for my dissertation during the COVID-19 pandemic. After providing the context for my own study, I lay out three main ideas that emerged while collecting data. These main ideas involve including participants in the decision-making process, sharing one another's challenging contexts to understand and connect, and the importance of teacher learning communities in times of isolation. My essay highlights some of the challenges and opportunities of collecting data during difficult circumstances and discusses the importance of professional learning communities to assist teachers with long-term coping within an unexpected context.

KEYWORDS

dissertation data collection; doctoral student; English teachers; teachers as readers; learning communities; participatory action research

INTRODUCTION

On Thursday, March 12th, 2020 at 3:20 PM, I received the following message regarding IRB approval for my dissertation:

*This letter serves as notification that protocol #10 entitled, *The Reading Habits of English Teachers* is approved.*

Best of luck with your research!

After months of working on the first three chapters (introduction, literature review, and methodology) of my dissertation, meeting with my committee, making revisions, submitting my proposal to the IRB, and making more revisions, I finally received the message I've been waiting for stating that my dissertation proposal was "approved". I was thrilled. I could now finally start collecting data. It felt like the dissertation was just beginning, and I felt fully prepared for what lay ahead.

Less than an hour after I received the above email, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan held a press conference stating that to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 all K-12 Maryland schools will be closed for two weeks starting March 16th. These two weeks of closed schools turned into the rest of the semester leaving many of my fellow dissertation colleagues frantically trying to puzzle out how to make their project work without actually being in the classroom. A Facebook group message soon popped up as my colleagues began collaborating on how to adjust their dissertations to be able to complete their work during these unusual and unnerving circumstances. The message feed included practical concerns about

how to conduct classroom observations when schooling had moved to virtual learning, along with anxiety-ridden messages of the unknown future, wondering how long school buildings would be closed and if they could just wait it out, and, understandably, some less nuanced messages expressing total frustration with the near impossible task that now lay ahead of them. I guiltily read the comments but did not contribute to the conversation as my research design did not require any in-person classroom visits and all my data was already designed to be collected electronically. After reading the frantic responses of my peers, I let out an audible sigh of relief with the naive belief that my research would not be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Of course, it quickly became evident that my research was not immune to the effects of COVID-19. Though the challenges may have been less direct than the difficulties many in my cohort experienced, I started to notice how COVID-19 permeated every aspect of my work. My participatory action research study focuses on the reading and teaching lives of five in-service secondary English teachers, including myself. I refer to this group as a professional learning community (PLC) (Trust et al., 2016). Between the time I had recruited research participants and the time I started to conduct my research, the teaching landscape for these five teachers had changed drastically. This newly formed anxiety-ridden context, forced me to ask questions about my research. Was I adding to the stress of the teacher participants? In a day full of Zoom meetings, is it fair to ask them to participate in one more Zoom call? Is it fair to ask participants who have spent the entire day on the computer to spend another hour and a half on a video call or to ask them to send me their latest teaching artifacts?

Moreover, there are questions having to do with my study design. Are my research questions still valid in this context? I was assuming a classroom context for the data I was gathering which



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included lesson plans. However, as distance-learning plans are not the types of lessons teachers typically create, are these lessons still a valid form of data? The discussion topics for the group meetings make no mention of online learning or teaching during a pandemic, so should I change the meeting topics or add additional meetings? How much or how little do I address COVID-19 in my study?

Below I lay out three main ideas that emerged as I wrestled with the above questions. I explain how with the participants I transparently discussed ways in which my research might be impacted by COVID-19. The results of this transparency led to solving problems together. Moreover, the impact of COVID-19 on the participants led to this learning community being an important place to feel connected and a source of comfort that they were not alone in facing these challenges.

Main Idea #1- Including participants in my research problems helped us to solve challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic while also increasing the agency of the participants as they became more invested members of the learning community.

My participatory action research (PAR) design lends itself to including participants' voices in answering study design questions. Herr and Anderson (2015) explain that action research, including PAR "is different in that research participants themselves either are in control of the research or are participants in the design and methodology of the research" (p. 1). With this in mind, I would often bring the participants into the discussions related to navigating this research project in a time of crisis. For example, when I asked about how we would find time to consider all these new emerging topics like teaching online, Candice (all names are pseudonyms), a literacy coach in Maryland, suggested meeting an additional time to discuss their experiences with online teaching during COVID. Therefore, instead of meeting six times as a group, the group willingly met seven times. Having Candice suggest the idea and then having other participants comment, and ultimately agree with her idea to meet a seventh time, illustrates that my participants were taking agency in this study, and it was not just me demanding more of my participants.

Another example of this community problem solving can be seen when discussing the type of lesson plans participants should submit. I inquired to the group whether it would be better to collect more traditional lesson plans they made when they were still doing in-school instruction or if it would be better to collect their current virtual teaching lesson plans. George, a freshman English teacher in Maryland, acknowledged that "My lesson plans right now, don't look a whole lot like my lesson plans in the classroom, especially when it comes to discussing literature", but George still insisted that we use online lesson plans, even if they were less traditional and thorough than the plans used in the classroom. In our discussion, George went back to our research question that explores how reading lives connect with teaching lives. George said, "If we're looking at reading journals as what we're reading now and then we're using lesson plans for what we've done in the past work, the observations we make are going to include a lot of conjecture". Other participants agreed with George that the lessons should align with their current reading lives, so we decided to collect virtual lesson plans. Not only did my participants help to provide a solution to my quandary but by

doing so they increased their own agency and commitment within this PLC.

Though the above questions were explicitly discussed in our group meetings, many other COVID-related questions answered themselves due to the nature and topic of the study. As I investigated the current reading lives and teaching experiences of teachers occurring during a pandemic, inherently COVID-related topics emerged naturally in our conversations and in other forms of data. This is because reading lives and teaching lives are often profoundly affected by personal and national events happening to or around them. Reading and teaching lives are not static but are evolving throughout their professional lives (Kerkhoff et al., 2020, Rubin & Land, 2017, Scholes, 1998). Part of this evolution is based on our observations, discussions, and interactions. A recent study by Kerkhoff et al. (2020) of pre-service English teachers argues that "reading identity is dynamic and can shift based on interactions with others and with texts" and teachers should "think of reading as something that is developing in themselves as well as their students over a lifetime" (p. 209). Within this dynamic, social view of reading, the participants and I examined our own reading lives and discussed how they are impacted by current events.

Relieved that we were addressing many of my initial COVID-related queries, I still could not help but be nagged by what emerged as my most concerning question: Was my study in some way adding to the stress and anxiety of the participants? Near the end of my study, it became clear that not only did my study not add to the stress of the participants, but it also became an important place to feel heard and connected. Sharing about my own changing roles and contexts and having others share about their changing contexts, allowed our community to understand each other and to better deal with our own circumstances.

Main Idea #2 As participants' contexts underwent significant changes, sharing these contexts helped us to understand one another and to draw comfort from our similar circumstances.

Teachers, including the participants in this study, were now being forced out of their classrooms as they worked from home to create a distance-learning program with little to no preparation. This of course was in addition to the general feelings of anxiety emanating from living in a COVID-19 world where there were many more unknowns than knowns. Amid this chaotic environment, I asked participants if we could hang out and talk about their reading lives. Initially, I did not fully understand what I was asking of the participants, and, ultimately, I did not anticipate the power and importance of this learning community. I also did not acknowledge the personal challenges that I had to reckon with in order to conduct my research.

Like all of us, I currently take on a multitude of roles and identities. Along with being a doctoral student and researcher, I am also a high school English teacher. I am the spouse of a registered nurse who works the night shift on a surgical unit at a hospital. Additionally, I am the parent of a three-year-old and a one-year-old. COVID-19 exponentially increased the stress within all of these roles.

On April 29th, 2020 I conducted a Google Meet with my 11th-grade students to discuss their reading of *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Optimistically attempting to balance roles, I scheduled the meeting for 1:00 to coincide with my children's naps.



Simultaneously, my wife was on a Zoom call with my three-year-old's speech pathologist. It was on this date that my three-year-old also decided to stop taking naps. My son, not appreciating my role as a teacher, demanded that I take on my role as a parent as he continually came out of his room seeking my attention. Upstairs, I attempted to run my class meeting while taking every chance I could to firmly request that my son go back into his room and take a nap. Downstairs, my wife repeatedly muted her conversation to vainly call up to our son to tell him to come down and leave dad alone. Though it is unique that it was on this day my son decided to stop taking naps, the larger chaotic nature of teaching and parenting from home with small children is in no way unusual.

I also found myself struggling to navigate teaching online. Coming up with authentic and engaging lessons, contacting parents of the many disengaged students, giving authentic, individualized feedback, and attempting to encourage students who were all facing their own personal and academic crises became an overwhelming task. Of course, my teaching took a backseat to the needs of my family. As COVID quickly escalated in Maryland, optional surgeries were placed on hold and my wife's general surgical unit was converted into a COVID-only unit, and she was soon working directly with COVID patients. The stresses of online teaching, along with caring for my family while my wife worked on the front lines of this pandemic, left me little mental and emotional strength for my dissertation research.

My experience was not unique. Everyone had his or her own daily challenges to navigate, including the participants in my study. When I asked James, an 8th grade ELA teacher in Colorado, about his context, he opened by saying, "The first part of my context is I've got a third-grader and a kindergartener at the house, and I believe the kindergartener has cried every day." He went on to talk about the daily struggles of being a responsible parent and helping his children with their own schoolwork, while also being a responsible and effective teacher. These are experiences James and I share with many other teachers. However, James and I, along with other participants, were able to take comfort in knowing that we were not alone in these challenges.

Throughout my study, participants referenced the benefits of being part of a community that met regularly to discuss their contexts and experiences. Participants did not always agree with one another nor did any of us have the exact same experiences, but we were all coming from a shared space of caring about our teaching and reading lives while facing daunting professional and personal obstacles. Participants often discussed how they drew comfort from the commonality of challenges and how they were making sense of these challenges. Though the schools and specific roles were different for each teacher, we all faced very similar challenges related to COVID and virtual teaching. Resulting from these changing contexts, participants also had to overcome that significant challenge of feeling isolated while teaching from home.

Main idea #3 Learning communities can be spaces where people can come together to feel connected in times of isolation.

Feelings of isolation and lack of professional support emerged as a significant issue facing teachers during COVID-19. My own experience witnessed teachers striving to feel connected as COVID-

related support Facebook groups and group text messages were formed as teachers attempted to reach out to one another during this isolating time. Noticing teachers turning towards social media for support, Trust et. al., (2020) examined how popular hashtags were being used by teachers during COVID-19. The researchers explain, "Given their physical isolation, educators turned to social media to interact with peers in ways that might otherwise have occurred at work" (p.156). The researchers then lay out some recommendations for educators, the first being that "teacher educators should aim to create learning spaces and experiences that will holistically support teachers' cognitive growth, affective well-being, and social needs" (p.156). Though social media is a valuable and convenient tool for connection, it perhaps does not fully satisfy one's personal and professional social needs. Somewhat unintentionally, my dissertation had created a learning community group where teachers did support one another's "cognitive growth, affective well-being, and social needs." This PLC provided a healthy place where participants could be heard, feel connected, and receive encouragement.

Examining some of the participants' responses illustrates that they felt connected and refreshed after in-depth conversations about their reading and teaching lives. In our final interview, George reflected on our learning community, saying that it had "been like a sanity saver at times for me". George went on to explain, "I think being a teacher is almost kind of lonely. Nobody really knows what you're going through". For George, our community became a place to feel less isolated in a time where teachers were forced to lose much of their connections with other teachers due to online learning.

Robert, a 12th grade English teacher in Chicago, echoed these same sentiments in his final interview. When asked about the impact of the learning community on his teaching life, he discussed how even though many of these decisions regarding distance learning seemed to be made at the local level, he was surprised and comforted about how school systems were making similar decisions. Robert went on to explain, "I think it's very comforting to be with people from around the country who are struggling with the same obvious hurdles we have". Whether it was grading policy, the challenges of using Google Meet, or the challenge of student engagement, this community turned to one another to be reminded that they were not alone in facing these difficulties. For Robert and George, our community became a place of shared experiences where they felt less isolated.

LOOKING AHEAD

In our final meeting, James remarked how he did not want the group to end and suggested that even after my dissertation study we keep meeting on a regular basis. Every other member of the group quickly agreed with James, and so we intend to keep meeting even after I'm finished collecting data. This desire to continue meeting demonstrates the value that members of the community drew from meeting with one another.

When I created this learning community, I knew each of the members, but none of the members knew each other. Through the course of our meetings, we grew from colleagues to friends. Our group discussed at length reasons for the success of this group. We speculated the reasons by saying we are all English teachers who loved reading, or being from different school systems allowed us to talk freely as we were away from the judgment of co-workers or administrators, or our shared beliefs in reader-centered approaches



to reading along with student-choice, and the importance of diverse stories. All of these factors certainly helped to connect us, however, I think the most significant factor was that we came together at the very moment when we needed community the most.

COVID-19 impacted every element of American society and teachers were certainly no exception to this. As teachers will continue to face challenges related to online learning or hybrid learning, my study illustrates the importance of a healthy teacher community in times of crisis. Small teacher communities across school systems can be a valuable asset to equip teachers with tools for sustainability and long-term coping within an unexpected context. Our learning community provided a venue for teachers to wrestle with their wide-ranging questions from the study's design, to the challenge of teaching Shakespeare online, to wondering how to balance their family and teaching roles, to discussions about why some students would not engage in online learning. When in other situations teachers would perhaps turn to connecting on social media or just left feeling isolated, our learning community provided a healthy space where participants could engage in thoughtful face to face interactions to share about their experiences and feel connected and heard. With the unknown times for teachers that lay ahead, these types of learning communities and healthy spaces may prove invaluable.

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