

Navigating Pandemic Teaching via Individualized Faculty Professional Development

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Abstract

As the universities across the country shifted to online instruction in March 2020, faculty development program administrators faced challenges in providing authentic and useful pedagogical resources to their already overwhelmed instructors. This one-person case study explores a mode of professional development which engages a faculty member in sustained, personal communications to support his disciplinary writing online course development. Both trauma-informed and relationship-centered, this alternative professional development model featured real-time reflection which resulted in high quality pedagogical adjustments to one disciplinary literacy instructor's newly online course.

Keywords: faculty development, online pivot, pandemic pedagogy, Writing Across the Curriculum

Like so many other colleges around the country, at 5 pm on March 11, 2020, my large research university transformed to fully online instruction to protect our community from the newly emerging coronavirus pandemic. In many ways, this historic move leveled the pedagogical playing field as seasoned professors and novices alike were forced to navigate a confluence of traumas—the global pandemic, sudden online instruction for their university classes, virtual education for their own children, and, sometimes, a loss of income. Somehow, it seemed like we were all

simultaneously experiencing this trauma together while also being totally isolated in our own homes.

As a Writing Across the Curriculum program assistant administrator, I am no stranger to urgent requests for help or resources, but this moment was like no other. As soon as the online pivot was announced, my unit began cranking out resources to support online writing instruction and assessment. Early on, though, it felt like we were throwing resources into the void. It seemed every major university quickly comprised lists of resources to support the abrupt changes in instruction; these long web pages contained links to campus health resources, articles about navigating the social and emotional effect of isolation and quarantine (*Stanford University*, 2020), and resources for faculty resilience (*University of Massachusetts Amherst*, 2020). Articles quickly emerged to provide instructional strategies for faculty to develop their emergency online classes (Bao, 2020). But when we were just trying to stay afloat, these resource listings—while necessary—seemed to add to our ever-growing To Do lists and reinforce the feelings of imposter phenomenon (Hutchins, 2015) as faculty tried to teach in what was, for most, an entirely new format.

While I navigated these challenges in my faculty development work, facilitated virtual workshops to support online writing instruction, and shifted the graduate course I was teaching to an online synchronous format, an email arrived in my inbox. Just three days after our university's pivot, Arthur (pseudonym to protect anonymity), a faculty member in the sciences with whom I was already acquainted from a previous faculty development event, reached out. The first line of his email declared, "I am in trouble." This simple statement began a months-long correspondence that served as a reset, allowing me to rethink the mode, manner, and aims of faculty professional development.

A short story in emails

The data for this one-person case study emerged in the form of 31 emails between March 14, 2020 and the end of the spring semester in mid-May. Below, I recreate the highlights of this email correspondence with Arthur's messages appearing on the left and mine on the right.

"I am in trouble. I cannot stand the thought of being on camera talking my students through a lab. I would rather have a root canal."

Arthur, March 14, 2020

“Being raised as I was[,] in these times I think of Aeschylus and his words about wisdom coming to us in our own despair. Hoping [the] wisdom part of that finds me soon.”

Arthur, March 14, 2020



“I would rather throw myself off a mountain than watch myself on video. So I get it! Don’t feel like you have to put on a massive dog and pony show for the whole class. Rather, focus on giving individual students really quality feedback.”

Christy, March 14, 2020

“Such a beautiful way to approach this situation. . . I have no idea if it’s true, but I read this tweet this morning, and I was struck by the cultural connection, the compassion, and the art.

Christy, March 14, 2020

“How’s the day going? [I’ve] been thinking of you.”

Christy, March 16, 2020

“I am really having trouble wrapping my head around what I should be doing. I guess we will see.”

Arthur, March 16, 2020

“Thanks for allowing me to chat this way. It really helps.”

Arthur, March 17, 2020

“How perfect that you are checking in with [students] individually . . . This is absolutely the best practice of online teaching—and of any teaching really.

Students don’t care about the flashy technology.”

Christy, March 18, 2020

“I was just grading a paper about heat stress in dairy cattle and it somehow made me think of you. . . Just wanted to make sure you’re chugging along and all is well.”

Christy, April 14, 2020

“[I have] been thinking about those [writing] tool boxes [sic] again and wonder[ing] what they would look like . . . One needs to introduce the students to the parts [of scientific writing] systematically and then through trial and error bring the pieces to the whole. I am . . . wondering if I can use that very approach especially online for the next iteration of [my course]. Something to think about.”

Arthur, April 29, 2020

“We could very easily think about creating a toolbox with ‘drawers’ that represent the technical communication, and scientific skills you expect of students as they enter your course . . .

More thoughts to ponder.”

Christy, April 29, 2020

“I am tired of COVID-19 isolation. Scientifically I get it. I [am] trained in infectious diseases so it is obvious. Spiritually, however, I am ready to throw off the spleen and move on . . . Doing my final [exam] again . . . And

from the depths of being bumbled [sic] about not teaching in person comes the following gem from a student. Comments like [the one below] make it all worth it.

‘[Dear Arthur,] I have learned a lot about myself throughout this essay’s completion. And as a final conclusion, I want to thank you for being a great professor. . . You showed me that it’s okay to do some things without needing to be a perfectionist, that I can trust my scientific instincts, and that I can believe in myself when things get tough.’”

Arthur, May 12, 2020

Implications of this model

These brief excerpts of emails between Arthur and I exemplify the very real challenges of the COVID-19 situation—challenges which we are still navigating. One challenge is woven into the academic fabric, painting a picture of faculty as people who are always the experts in the room. Another exists in creating and maintaining relationships with prolonged social distancing measures. The online pivot in March 2020 unmoored us all, making the outside world exist only on our computer screens. As we drift through these long days and short weeks with so many pressures placed on our time, many faculty desire a “how to” guide to effective online teaching in a pandemic. Of course, such a guide doesn’t exist and, if it did, it would lack transferability between disciplines, contexts, and universities.

However, perhaps the key to building relationships with online disciplinary writing course instructors (a legitimate challenge) isn’t found in Zoom workshops, in fancy PowerPoint-driven seminars, or via pre-packaged online teaching courses. Instead, these emails present another option to faculty development. Maybe effective and sustainable professional development experiences in these times aim for a combination of the following: A recognition of our shared trauma, being vulnerable about how we are feeling in any given moment, and individualized, real-time suggestions for teaching moves. Rather than a procedural guide, the individualized communications in our email exchanges exemplify “practicing what we preach” in the classroom.

Students joke about Zoom University (Lorenz, Griffith, and Isaac, 2020) and social media is awash with posts questioning the quality of online higher education, but lost in these memes is the fact that educators, like their students, are humans just trying to navigate the collective trauma while keeping their families safe and their classes afloat.

In his book exploring the connections between writing and trauma, Roy Fox (2016) states, “The language most often used for critical thinking, as well as ‘healing’ is, you guessed it, expressive language, the very ‘Dear Diary Trash’ we love to hate” (p. 25). Fox then details other language practices used to simultaneously work through problems and heal from trauma events including “speculating, hypothesizing . . . expressions of doubt and qualification, litany or listing, and metaphor” (p. 25). The sort of individualized faculty development exemplified throughout this essay includes just these trauma-informed elements. If you were to wade through the rest of our emails, you’d see mentions of birthday dinners, bike rides, book recommendations, partners, and surprises from old friends. You’d find Moby Dick metaphors used to help grapple with the unsureness of waiting. You’d find a few suggestions I made for Arthur’s online writing instruction. But you’d also see many instances of Arthur asking and answering his own pedagogical questions. You’d see him being reflective about his teaching and his students and coming up with small adjustments to increase the impact of his courses.

Among the positive outcomes of the spring 2020 semester is a shift in emphasis for faculty development units like mine; we have been provided the opportunity to reflect on the goals of professional development and to consider the appropriate modes for achieving those goals. In doing so, we have been reminded of the very real teaching benefits that are created when we focus our time on sustained faculty-to-faculty, person-to-person professional development. These lessons can, of course, transfer to faculty-student relationships as well, and we can only hope that the gentleness with which we have treated our faculty colleagues and our students continues long past the end of this pandemic. In one of his final messages of the semester, Arthur writes, “I have to work on getting better at this gig as I know caring, sharing, and time spent is not enough.” But maybe these things *are* enough, for students and faculty learners alike.

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Authors Bio

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