

A Controlled Freak-Out: Mentoring, Writing, and Parenting during COVID-19

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A CCCC THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

I signed on to be a CCCC Documentarian with enthusiasm. I was excited to document my CCCC experience this year as I anticipated it would be similar to others. My first CCCC conference was in 1998, and I've attended or presented at most of them since then. I wanted to write about how I read through the program with delight as I choose sessions to attend, meet with friends and colleagues both at sessions and at art museums, and, as my role has changed over the years, attend a social for graduate students and alumni from Virginia Tech.

If I had traveled to Milwaukee, I was scheduled to facilitate a workshop for ATTW on Tuesday afternoon about building alternative archives. All the workshop facilitators were scheduled to have dinner with Cheryl Geisler on Tuesday evening—I'm very disappointed about not doing the workshop and not attending that dinner. The participants scheduled for my workshop are working on amazing projects and I was so excited to meet them and learn about their work. I also would have attended the Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition and met with Steve Parks before the Documentarians reception event. Steve and I are working on a collaborative project together and we were going to strategize our work for the coming months. We're used to working over email and the phone, but it would have been great to meet in person. I also would have attended the CCC editorial board meeting, attended a variety of presentations on research methods and displacement, and attended presentations of graduate students and alumni from our program.

One of my most favorite things about going to CCCCs is spending time with my best friend from graduate school. She lives in Milwaukee, and teaches in the UW system, so I may have gone to her house, caught up with her kids and spouse, and discussed the higher

education situation in Wisconsin. I have so much respect for anyone teaching in Wisconsin these last years. From my friend I've learned about the grassroots efforts that she and her colleagues have engaged in for years to bring equitable labor conditions to all faculty. Now that the pandemic has threatened the financial stability of many colleges and universities, many are turning to their experience managing dire situations. She's an excellent faculty member and I'm inspired by her determination and grit during what has been an impossible situation. She's also really fun, funny, and caring and it's a joy to be near her. I was deeply saddened not to see her at CCCCs this year.

Another thing I usually do at the conference is look around in lobbies and hallways for particular people to say "Hi" to. These are people who I don't know well enough to share lunch or even have a long conversation, but with whom I'm acquainted and like to check in. One of these people is Shirley Logan. She's retired now so I'm not sure if she would have been there, but I love seeing her at CCCCs. She was the first person to hire me to teach technical writing and encourage me to pursue an academic career. Over the years when I've seen her at CCCCs, she remembers me and she asks how I am and about Virginia Tech. I'm always impressed that she remembers me. She was one of my first mentors in the field, encouraging me to apply to PhD programs, valuing my experience as a technical writer and introducing me to other graduate students. With the increased political activism in the last few weeks, I have thought much about Shirley, her mentorship, and her leadership in our field.

WORKING FROM HOME

With the cancelation of the conference and the move to online instruction and working from home, I was glad that the editors decided to continue the Documentarian project. I teach autobiography and write about archiving and research methods, so I lean toward valuing this kind of archival role. A question that I thought about throughout this time was whether the role of Documentarian and the time to write/reflect in this way has something to do with privilege. I wondered if most of my fellow Documentarians were graduate students and junior colleagues, and, if so, what does it mean that the role falls to them? I wondered if it mirrors administrative, committee, and mentoring work in our field that is often taken up by junior colleagues and underrepresented groups. And as the writing prompts asked us to consider

where and when and under what conditions we were writing, I was acutely aware of my own relative privilege, both as a senior faculty member and as a person in my community with the means, ability, and kind of job to work from home.



Figure 18.1. Black cat sitting by a laptop and computer monitor on a desk by a window with a blooming redbud tree in the distance.

During the lockdown, I wrote every day in the same space (Figure 18.1). Though I had just moved when the pandemic was gaining full steam, I think this would have been true anyway—I tend to write in the same spaces. However, I normally write in my campus office as well, since I'm in the office often for administrative duties. The routine of having the same space at home really helped provide me focus and comfort. And the heightened awareness, both because of the pandemic and because of the prompts from the Documentarian editors, brought

into sharp relief its necessity and also the privilege I have as a writer and academic to have such a space with equipment, a comfortable chair, high-speed internet, my books. So many do not have one or any of those things. Many of our students who are asked to complete courses online this semester do not have adequate internet access, and I was reminded of the work of Cindy Selfe and Gail Hawisher from long ago, which asked us to consider equity in technology and online instruction. Many of our faculty were prepared to teach online, but many were not and have faced high levels of stress in addition to the stress of the pandemic itself. There will be lasting repercussions of this moment as we continue our work toward equity in educational and technological access and as we face the coming fall semester with hybrid or complete online instruction for the foreseeable future.

Not long after the conference was canceled and our classes shifted online, my son's school closed as well. In those early days, I tried to keep up a routine to help my son break up the day. His life has been the most changed within our family—no school, no face-to-face interaction with friends, no baseball practice—just him and his parents. So, by intentionally scheduling my day in relation to his day, I hoped it would help his days go by faster. As a family, we had conversations about our situation relative to other families and tried to recognize how we could be in a position to help others. I thought a lot in those early days about how I hoped to get some work done, and I wanted to be a source of strength for my family. When we look back on all this, I wanted my son to remember some fun things like board games and family movie nights, but also, I wanted him to be aware of the ways his experience of the pandemic could be different from some kids in the community.

While my son didn't need help with homework, he did need help managing his grief and loss of not going to school every day and interacting with his friends. But we didn't know he was grieving until much later. He seemed fine at first, as we strictly adhered to physical distancing and staying at home. I will spend much more time over the coming years wondering if we did the right things for him. We know our home space was safe and spacious and equipped for access, but we worried and continue to worry about the impacts of the stress and uncertainty for him and his friends.

In those early days of working from home, the days ran together. We started to not know if it was a Tuesday or a Friday. I wrote one day

in my reflection, “There’s a random roll of gorilla tape on my desk—not sure how it got there.” Another day I wrote, “I think I must be in acceptance mode. The last two days I’ve been grumpy, but today I was more myself because I’ve settled into the reality that this will go on for months, and I may as well get used to it.” There were early days when I thought it would end and we could go back to working and schooling, but as time went on it was clear things would never be the same. Now that the fall looks different, we’ll all likely be home again, and we’re making plans to do things differently as a family.

I can tell I was very enthusiastic in the first few reflections and then I became tired or emotionally drained. The announcement of a state-wide shutdown was pending, my teenager was realizing the finality of the decisions to close his school. It was hard to write reflections during this time but I’m so glad that I did. I asked my graduate students to do some similar exercises in their researcher’s journals as they faced re-imagining their projects now that their human subjects research had been paused. I asked them to give themselves time to mourn the loss of the project they’d imagined, but to also reimage the project so that they could progress. I also encouraged them that productivity expectations might need to be revised. This has been a delicate balance for myself as a writer and as a mentor to undergraduates, graduate students, and junior colleagues. I feel like the timing of being asked to do these reflections couldn’t have come at a better time, as they were helpful to me to center myself so that I could be available to students as they navigated similar feelings and issues during this time. It’s really incredible that this Documentarian role was established THIS year. The timing was uncanny, actually, and it reinforced what I’ve tried to teach and write about reflexive practice as a teacher, writer, and researcher.

MENTORING

While I attempted to build a routine both for the home and for my own writing, every day there are a number of emerging issues to address. The most pressing issue was helping graduate students as they transitioned to taking and teaching their classes online. I was not doing the difficult technical support work, but as director of the graduate program, I fielded many emails and calls as graduate students navigated being both an instructor and a student. There were many emotional phone calls as graduate students worried for their health and the health of their families, and whether they would be able to finish their

course work while figuring out online instruction. They are all devoted teachers themselves and wanted so desperately to be good teachers to their own students. As the tension really built during March, I wrote this response as one of my reflections for the Documentarian writing prompts:

I've been in a sort of ordered chaos freak-out sprinkled with the calm that I know graduate students need to see from me. So, I give them lots of advice about how it's going to be ok, how they *will* progress in their degree, how we will get them to graduation, how their committees will be flexible, and that their projects will still be viable and interesting even though their human subject work has been paused by IRB. I try to be calm for them, a strategist for them, and at the same time I feel their same stress and worry. I'm really glad I took a meditation class this fall.



Figure 18.2. Picture of blooming lavender irises next to a garden wall and big rock.

Being available to advise graduate students is really important to me; however, it's really difficult work. Before the pandemic, I sought out a variety of self-care strategies (Figure 18.2) so that, in turn, I could be available to students and junior colleagues as they pursue their programs of study, write their dissertations, and navigate the tenure track. The pandemic made this work all the more critical, and I thought often about the timing of having some skills in meditation to help myself be present and aware.

While writing the Documentarian responses, our state had not yet issued a state-wide lockdown, but it was imminent and felt ominous. Our administration was telling us to be prepared for it. In March I wrote, "I don't really know what 'prepared' means in this situation. I have experienced backcountry camping, not a pandemic. I have experience in overcoming trauma, but not the sustained trauma of a pandemic. I've been thinking a lot about the survival training course I took at a military academy. I've also been thinking about which bags/backpacks to use if we have to leave." Now that I'm writing this essay a few months later, I can see that I wasn't overreacting in March. On top of that, the killing of unarmed Black people, not a new phenomenon, continues. It's so bad that we're risking our lives to protest—both because of the police in riot gear and because of the potential spread of the virus. While I had been more hopeful about things in May, I've fallen back into despair that's very difficult to climb out of. So, self-care and resetting are skills I have to return to again and again. I joined GirlTrek.org's 21 Days in History walking meditation. GirlTrek founders Vanessa Harrison and Morgan Dixon, now with more than 600,000 followers, started a walking meditation for twenty-one days in June. Each day, Vanessa and Morgan walk while discussing an important African American woman in history and how their work has impacted them as women and as activists. I've joined them as a form of self-care and also as a way to listen and learn for additional ways to participate as an ally.

One of the issues I've worked on for years is reliable summer funding for our graduate students. Our graduate students are on a nine-month contract. Most seek summer jobs away from the university, but international students are limited in what kind of employment they can do based on their visa restrictions. This long-standing financial concern became even more pressing with the impacts of COVID-19. I'm happy that we were able to secure funding for all the students this

summer. It took a pandemic for this change to be made, and I don't know whether it will be sustained.

WRITING: AS A PRACTICE AND AS A FIELD

Writing during this time has been critical to help me settle my mind. That the questions from the Documentarian editors asked us to think emotionally about how we're handling the day brought to the forefront the impact of the emotional drain that the pandemic has on all of us, even if to varying degrees. The reflections helped me realize something very important. Before the pandemic and the lock-down, I had grown increasingly weary of all the committee meetings that are often not productive. Then I had my first Zoom meeting after a couple of weeks of not seeing anyone, and I was never so excited to see my colleagues. After not meeting with them for several weeks, the meeting was energetic, friendly, compassionate, productive, and efficient. So those two things combined—the heightened awareness from reflection prompts about missing people, together with a new lens through which we're now having Zoom/pandemic meetings, has really been something to think about as we move forward. This relates to another discovery. I'm left with a desire to slow down. I love my work, I love our field, and I love the people I get to work with, not only on my campus, but across the country. Because the pace in my department has been so hectic in the last few years, I had forgotten how much I feel that way about the work. This moment of isolation and the opportunity to reflect as a Documentarian during this moment has reconnected me to these feelings, and I am profoundly grateful.

Since March, many of the issues I faced in those early days are the same now, except classes have ended and some of the stress has ended. However, that stress has been replaced or amplified by increased police brutality against Black people. Many of us are protesting, and I wonder if we're in the streets because we can't gather in our homes in the same way we might have. We've come to a breaking point, and our weariness and sadness over the pandemic means we have no more tolerance for what's been going on for generations. I don't really know. But attending a variety of activities and seeing all the statements of support coming from departments, colleges, and universities and other organizations, makes me even more grateful for the training I've had in the field of rhetoric and composition. We're not a perfect discipline, but at the heart of my pedagogical training, both in graduate school

and from colleagues with whom I work, is a commitment to inclusive pedagogical practices. Initiatives like DBLAC and NextGen are all signs that our field is and has been on the pulse of culture, history, and equity and the ways that writing, composing, and research have a role to play in these issues, even if, as a field, we have much to do ourselves to improve our discipline. Having served as director and committee member on many dissertations, having chaired a search committee last fall, and having served as mentor to graduate students and colleagues both formally and informally, I have hope for our field as our colleagues insist on our action and will be capable and responsible leaders and scholars. I knew this before March, but with the opportunity to write about it, I have a renewed commitment to our field and our colleagues.