Chapter 31. Boundaries and Labor During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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I received a text last night from a tutor saying that she wasn't going to make it to her 9 a.m. shift. I looked over at my alarm clock. It was just past midnight. I sat up in bed, asked if she was okay, and waited for the *dot, dot, dot* on my screen to turn into words. Yes, she's okay, but she's having trouble keeping up with all of her classes on Zoom, and she can't bring herself to sit at her computer for her three-hour shift tomorrow. I replied, "I understand. Take care of yourself, and we can chat more tomorrow." Though my mind was exhausted, I stayed up for another hour thinking about how peculiar it was that I was texting tutors after midnight on a Tuesday night. This pandemic had altered my boundaries and upended my ideas about work-home balance.

In early March 2020, my university went on spring break. At the end of that week, we were informed that we wouldn't be returning to campus. "Stay home," they said. "Put your classes and services online." Some departments didn't have to change much, and they posted videos of their lectures to Canvas. The writing center, however, needed to change in drastic ways: while we would normally meet at an arm's distance in a small, windowless room in the library, we were now relegated to remain unknown miles apart, connected only by technology.

We needed to have synchronous Zoom tutorials, which we had never done before, and that required learning how to access the platform through our scheduling software and how to tutor writing over Zoom. We also needed to ramp up our asynchronous tutoring, which required intensive instruction, usually via telephone. Labor changed, and space between us increased.

In October 2020, my department chair urged me to reopen the physical writing center to support the limited number of students who returned to campus. But the writing center would not be the same as when I left it. I needed to safeguard our space, and my work responsibilities quickly included the work of a safety officer. While the majority of my department worked from the safety of their own homes, I donned a mask and, with some hesitancy, headed into work. My first task was determining what safety measures the ever-changing laws required, what other directors had purchased for their centers and in what quantities, what product brands were well-reviewed, and which companies might deliver promptly. I spent hundreds of dollars creating physical boundaries in my writing center, including Plexiglass desktop barriers, floor decals directing students to stand at least six feet from the reception desk, face shields, nitrile gloves, and boxes of disposable masks.

As soon as the equipment arrived and facility operations helped me to install the desktop barriers, a few tutors returned to our physical center. I was excited to see them again and return to some level of normalcy, but I worried for their health, my health, and my family's health. The isolation I experienced during those first six months of the pandemic was justified by its promises of safety, so leaving my home to return to work came with much trepidation. I'm sure my tutors felt something similar, and I'll be forever grateful to those who risked the return so early into the pandemic.

Perhaps the anxiety of returning–or even the prospect of communicating with people outside of one's social pod–explains why the feel of our writing center didn't return to normal that October. Whatever the reason, the distance I had been feeling for six months remained even as I sat just one cubicle over from my tutors. Across-the-room waves and friendly nods replaced handshakes and fist bumps, and silence replaced conversation as the tutors toiled away on their online coursework. The comradery and intimacy of our space was missing, and unwelcome sterility took over.

Though the number of in-person tutorials our center led stayed low, our online numbers increased. But instead of feeling impersonal and sterile like the physical writing center had become, Zoom tutorials somehow accomplished the opposite: they opened up our lives to strangers in ways beyond our control.

Pre-COVID-19, we were only judged by how we presented ourselves on campus. When working and learning over Zoom, however, people reveal so much more about themselves; the boundary between the personal and professional is blurred. I've spoken to K-12 teachers who have seen this in the extreme. Children resist the requirement to keep their cameras on during online school because they don't want to show their teachers and classmates that they live in their family car. They don't want to display their families' filthy or tiny apartments or reveal things about their parents (their language, substance abuse problems, appearances, etc.) that would typically remain private.

My tutors have reported similar problems, though with much lower stakes. One of them reported being embarrassed that she had to hold tutorials from her bed since her apartment was so small and no professional spaces were available. Another said with a smile, "Clients can see my bedroom. It's weird that I have to clean *my room* for *work* every day."

I, too, have been in a similar situation, with admittedly fewer consequences because of my privilege. Without a spare room in my townhouse, I have to use the kitchen table for my desk when I work from home. I drape a towel over the liquor cabinet and position the camera to avoid the painting of the Laphroaig Distillery that adorns my dining room. When my young son is with me during meetings with my department chair–or worse, a dean–I try to control my uneasiness when he approaches me mid-meeting because he misses me or because he needs assistance with his button. Doesn't he know I'm trying to project professionalism and not my maternity?

Not only has our work changed because of our switch to Zoom, but so have the many ways in which we see–and judge–one another. During a Zoom call, we judge each other by the contents of the closets we see in the background and the non-academic books on our bookshelves. We see each other with multifaceted identities–of mothers, roommates, caregivers, and pet owners–regardless of our desire to share those facets of who we are. Our boundaries are less defined now than perhaps they've ever been. The actual labor–the work we do and how we do it–is only part of the big picture about how mid-pandemic online tutoring differs from pre-pandemic in-person tutoring.

I know my boundaries have been compromised these past two years. I share more of myself than I want to over Zoom. I've given all of my employees my cell phone number, and, as I've already revealed, my tutors text me at all hours of the night. I used to check my email between eight and five Monday through Friday, and now I check my email in the evenings and on the weekends, as people's situations seem to change hourly. I check my text messages and new Slack channel countless times a day. Especially during a pandemic, some things can't wait until Monday morning.

However, as we approach the third year of this pandemic, I have to admit that most of my office's communications lack the urgency they held early on, and that has allowed me the space and time to reimagine how my boundaries–and those I create for my center–will look. This pandemic has taught me the importance of health and family, and so one boundary that I will instate will be the use of the Do Not Disturb feature in both Slack and iMessage so that I can reestablish some uninterrupted family time at home and give my tutors my full attention when I'm at work. I will also allow tutors to choose where they hold their Zoom tutorials so they do not have to reveal their private details online. And finally, I've recently removed the Plexiglass dividers in my center; students and tutors can decide the distance between them and navigate their proximity collaboratively, just as they work collaboratively on a piece of writing. Tutors are gifted in this regard.

These recent years have dissolved old boundaries and created new ones in our writing centers. But writing centers have proved to be resilient. Though I would be foolish to believe that we can fully return to a pre-COVID-19 workplace–one with the physical closeness we once enjoyed and where we could more easily control our professional images and means of communication–I am confident that our resiliency will continue into the years to come and that we can create healthy, reasonable, and sustainable boundaries that most benefit our centers.