

Chapter 32. Bearing Witness: The Emotional Labor of (Pandemic) Tutoring

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It was a Friday, March 6, 2020. Reports of a “novel” coronavirus spreading like wildfire throughout our community had infected nearly every conversation on campus as we all contemplated the final two weeks of winter quarter. Then, at 2:34 pm on the last day of week nine, my director brought word that beginning Monday all instruction would move online, including our writing center.

“We’ll be working from home for a few weeks,” she said. “Administration is still working out the logistics, but you’ll get information later today about how to connect with our students.”

Turning in the doorway, she added, “Forward your phone, and take whatever you need. Head home whenever you’re ready.”

Locking my office door that day, I had no idea those last few weeks of winter would stretch into spring and summer, then fall, winter, and yet another spring and summer before I’d return.

Over the next eighteen months, my face-to-face collaborations with students morphed into conversations with screens. Our writing center has offered asynchronous consultations to students for years—what we call “written feedback”—so continuing that service was easy. But as face-to-face interactions became virtual, unfamiliar technologies took center stage. Remarks like: “I think you’re muted,” or “Can you see my screen?” punctuated every conversation. Then came the apologies over private challenges that filtered into Zoom rooms (“Sorry for the noise. My kids are fighting in the hallway”). As real life intersected with technology, I sought to navigate another novel situation: virtual spaces that required no physical labor to access but were nonetheless emotionally and physically draining—at least compared to the routine face-to-face meetings that used to structure my days. Yet, over time, new formats grew familiar, even comfortable. And despite the occasional bandwidth hiccups, we all learned what to expect.

What I didn’t expect, however, was the shift in my relationships with students—particularly those I saw regularly. Technologies like Zoom turned us into everyday witnesses with front-row seats to each other’s lives. While reading students’ papers, I entered not just living rooms, office cubicles, or kitchen tables, but the experiences and emotions of the moment.

And like a witness in a courtroom, I am here to testify to the impact of those moments.

For example, Zoom made possible my witness of the joy of a student who had taken her citizenship oath the day before, even as that joy was tempered by

disappointment over COVID-19 protocols that kept her family waiting in the car. Zoom made me a witness to the off-camera meltdown of a four-year-old who decided his student father's meeting had gone on long enough and "now" was the promised hour of the pillow fort. A few weeks later, I bore witness to more pillows, as I met with a faculty member propped up in bed with her young daughter sleeping beside her—both stricken with COVID-19. I occasionally even witnessed invisibility: conversations held with a smiling photo or a name emblazoned across a black screen. These interactions represented lives into which I was not invited, their faceless voices sometimes carrying the emotional exhaustion of loneliness or other pandemic-inspired struggles. Zoom opened a window—day after day—to witness overwhelmed students laboring to maintain a sense of normalcy in indisputably abnormal times.

And most painfully, Zoom allowed my witness of the fears of a graduate student for her grown daughter, hospitalized with COVID-19. Weeks later, I again bore witness as grief invaded her anxiety over her now orphaned grandchildren amidst a family-wide COVID-19 diagnosis—all while this student staggered under a full load of summer courses. As we reviewed her final papers, her pain bubbled over, and we cried together—our tears witnessed only by Zoom.

These experiences—and many others like them—made clear that the pandemic carried a different kind of labor into the emergency workspace of my home. During those eighteen long months, my job became so much more than writing collaboration. In the virtual spaces afforded by technology, I became—unanticipated—witness, counselor, and comforter, all the while laboring to maintain a reassuring professional face in the midst of student trauma.

Dealing with the emotions of others has always played a role in writing center work, as staff and tutors work to encourage stressed-out students. And as a personal writing specialist, my work centers on helping people tell personal—and occasionally, painful—stories in statements for scholarships, internships, or graduate school. But throughout the pandemic, a typical appointment shifted toward levels of emotional support that had never been required before. Sure, my students have always shared their personal challenges: concerns over coursework or family expectations, deadlines that loom large. For many students, finding time to write is overshadowed by the clamor of other responsibilities: jobs, children, life. And when subject matter is closely tied to students' identity, writing can be emotionally fraught.

Even in *ordinary* times.

But what I witnessed during the pandemic was something else—something deeper. Students were hurting. Though coming for writing help, they sometimes brought loneliness, worries over sickness, loss of childcare or jobs—even food insecurity and impending homelessness. Would this have happened if we'd met face to face? Maybe. But in seven years in the writing center, I had never experienced anything quite like this. The screens between us somehow seemed to make it easier for students to share private pain they might not have otherwise spoken.

With their lives upended, students' abilities to cope were often overtaxed as they and their families passed through the turbulent waters of the ongoing pandemic, while trying to continue their education and maintain some sense of normalcy. And like my students, I was also dazed by the intersecting pressures of job and family during a public health crisis that no one saw coming. Yet, for more than eighteen months, I listened. I commiserated. I smiled and encouraged. I assured students we'd all be ok.

I even offered feedback on writing.

And I ended each day depleted by the effort—my home no longer feeling like the sanctuary from work it once had. Interacting with traumatized students and attempting to support them through my own emotional labor had taken a personal toll: I grew anxious, wanting nothing more than to hide from the world and resentful that I couldn't. Combined with the fact that, during these same eighteen months, I had been writing my dissertation during every spare moment. I was an emotional wreck, no matter how much I pretended everything was fine.

In September 2021, administration called us back to campus. I returned to my office, anxious to reclaim a positive viewpoint. As classes began, my colleagues and I—masked, vaxxed, and wary—prepared to greet the students we had been assured were eager to return in-person. But as fall quarter unfolded, our writing center was quiet. We came to campus daily but continued to work primarily in virtual spaces, by student request. As 2022 arrived and COVID-19 again swept through our community, winter quarter began with a last-minute, month-long return to online instruction. While many classes continued online for the rest of the quarter—their faculty unwilling to confront the chaos of a mid-quarter return—writing center staff worked a staggered hybrid schedule: on campus four days, working remotely on the fifth. Yet, from winter through spring and summer, most of my appointments with students remained virtual. The burdens of the pandemic and accompanying social stressors persisted for us all.

Today—mid-September 2022—I am preparing for yet another fall quarter. Yet, in storying the experiences of the past two and a half years, I am beginning to realize some of what I've learned: that the objectivity writing centers often claim is not possible, not *really*. We cannot hide from students' distress. Still, much of the emotionally fraught work we do remains unwitnessed outside the walls of our centers. Which leads me to wonder: is it because we are not *speaking* that no one is listening?

Bearing witness—sharing stories of our experiences with others—opens a space to make meaning for ourselves *and* our audiences. After all, naming our trauma can be empowering. In discussing this idea with my director, she seemed surprised—at first—by my suggestion of opening such a dialogue with our student tutors. Yet, she came to agree that sharing the personal impact of our emotional labor can help us find meaning in it, both now and moving forward.

This dialogue is now part of our tutor training agenda for the year.

Reaching the end of this testimony, I feel ready to move forward, to bear witness—at last—to tiny glimmers of hope:

- That this year will be different.
- That students will find their way back into our physical space.
- That face-to-face writing groups, workshops, and consultations will come to feel “normal” again.
- That our emotional labors will lighten as we share them.
- And finally, I am reaching for the hope that I will soon bear witness to *all* these things.