

# Chapter 33. Care and Work/S paces: Writing Center Labor During COVID-19

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When we held our writing center's virtual end-of-the-year celebration in April 2021, I was working from the spare bedroom at my mom's house. As long as the chair was positioned directly in front of the computer, you could avoid seeing the bed in the background; the headboard barely visible in the periphery. I never did figure out how to use the Zoom backgrounds.

When we held our writing center's virtual end-of-the-year celebration that April, it was less than a month before my mom went into Hospice. During the celebration, I feigned excitement for our graduating consultants while we waited for a family meeting with my mom's palliative care team.

Whereas COVID-19 made travel impossible for some, working remotely allowed me to be back home with my mom as she became progressively sicker, and ultimately passed away. I came back to Canada that January without booking a return flight to Florida. I knew I wanted to stay as long as possible. My flight home was the day before Canada implemented its COVID-19 testing requirement to enter the country. I waited in line at the Fort Lauderdale airport with sunburnt families carrying Disney suitcases. We weren't supposed to travel. While those cruise- and Disney-bound passengers were living as though the pandemic wasn't happening, my life felt like it was at a standstill as I waited to travel back home.

My job in my writing center is mainly administrative. Half my load is teaching first-year writing and graduate-level classes in my home department, and the other half is a faculty coordinator in our university's writing and communication center. For the writing center, my job primarily involves supporting graduate student writers by working with faculty across the disciplines and conducting discipline-specific writing workshops. I was fortunate to be able to do all of that remotely during the pandemic. No one cared that there was part of a bed in the background as long as I covered the writing content the students needed. I conducted my first workshop of the winter 2021 semester through Zoom with a group of about 130 Pharmacy students alone in the Airbnb while I quarantined before moving in with my mom.

Like for many, the COVID-19 pandemic caused me to pause and re-think my relationship with work. As a junior faculty member in my first job post-graduate school, I was used to working from home before the pandemic started. I spent many hours at the dining room table, the couch, the balcony, or the kitchen

counter. But during the pandemic, the boundaries of work and home dissolved even further. The weight of being at home, being with my mom, was ever-present. It was impossible to turn off what was happening around me during the times I was “at work.” Yet, being hyper-focused on what was happening around me wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. I wanted to be present. My mom and I incorporated daily walks and evening time to cross stitch together. I no longer felt the need to spend my free time at my computer answering emails or catching up on work.

Being back home with my mom for five months changed my orientation to work/spaces and to the boundaries of work/home and public/private. While my writing center office was a shared space between three faculty coordinators—belonging at once to no one and to everyone—the space at my mom’s was also shared between myself and family members who used the workspace while caretaking for my mom. I tried (and failed) to separate the space where I did the majority of my work from the rest of my life.

In writing center lore, the space of the writing center is often emphasized: the closet, the basement, the shiny new location in the middle of campus. The physical space is an important one. That’s where connections are made and the space is where students are invited to return again and again. Consultants in my once face-to-face writing center started consulting remotely through Zoom once the pandemic began. We were lucky. We tried to keep our pre-COVID-19 expectations for connecting with students and maintaining professionalism the same: cameras on, limit background noises and distraction, avoid eating during a session, no consultations from your car. This was all easier said than done. It’s hard to ignore a family member just off camera when you’re working on a consultation or multitasking reading a draft while videoing with someone on your phone. The lag on Zoom can make carrying a conversation hard. While we could keep up with our number of consultations, the interactions weren’t exactly the same. Our lives came crashing into our workplace, though perhaps they were never really not there. . . .

Even when we were mindful of what students were experiencing while working from home—the technological barriers, being at home with families or kids, the burnout from being on the screen for hours a day—we didn’t truly change our orientations to labor. While I could work from anywhere, it felt as though I couldn’t really escape work. In sharing with others, if anything, throughout the pandemic, it felt like we were always on—professor on-demand only a click away. I didn’t fully realize the gravity of what it meant to work in those conditions until I was back home with my mom. How could I expect to be professional in one room when my mom was getting sicker and weaker in the next? How could I contain my life as a professional to one part of the house when life was so much bigger than the tiny laptop that made up my working life?

During the period of time I spent with my mom, I continued working as an administrator, teaching, mentoring, and supporting graduate student writers on my campus. As Clinnin (2020) writes of writing program administrators: “. . . in college settings are rarely prepared to perform the multiple forms of labor—especially

emotional labor—that are necessary to safely and effectively respond to crisis” (p. 130). We aren’t readily equipped to respond to crisis situations, especially when the writing program administrator (or writing center administrator in this case) is also facing their own trauma. During the pandemic, we were all called to crisis and to respond out of the blue. Clinnin (2020) recommends creating preventative self-care plans to put in place in anticipation of crisis scenarios. While impossible for me to know pre-pandemic, going forward that advice is especially useful since a crisis can strike at any time.

Throughout my mom’s sickness, I worked without taking any leave. Others on my leadership team covered for me when working and caregiving became too much. So many during the pandemic weren’t as fortunate. I’m thankful I was able to go home and be with my mom. However, life continues, and as the US attempts to move on from the pandemic, we need to be aware of the distinctions between our home/work spaces and to the laboring conditions we (and our students) operate in. We can’t forget all that has happened and continues to happen as the world tries to lurch back to “normal.” As administrators, that means respecting students’ boundaries and understanding the challenges that come with being a caretaker at home and a student/worker. It means recognizing the emotional and mental labor we all operate under. It means refusing to ask them (or ourselves) to do more than necessary.

My mom passed away May 2021. I spent the summer cleaning out and selling her house with my sisters before returning to Florida. This experience made me realize how important it is to maintain work/life boundaries and hold dear the moments I have with those I love. I now have an eight-month-old and have learned yet again the importance of slowing down, closing my computer, disabling Outlook notifications on my phone, taking the good with the bad, and living in the moment. I try and extend a greater understanding and compassion to the students and consultants I work with. I encourage them to do things they enjoy and prioritize their emotional, physical, and mental well-being over their success in school or work. Especially with the graduate students I mentor, I stress the importance of taking time away from work and saying “no.” Although it’s a struggle, I try to avoid the constant always-on attitude and resist the need to stay connected. While the desire to return to pre-pandemic life is strong, there are some things we can’t simply return to. We must remember to prioritize our health, our relationships, and the people we are outside of and away from our workspaces.

## References

- Clinin, K. (2020). And so I respond: The emotional labor of writing program administrators in crisis response. In C. Adams Wooten, et al. (Eds.), *The things we carry: Strategies for recognizing and negotiating emotional labor in writing program administration* (pp. 129-144). Utah State University Press.