

## Building Strength in an Uncommon Time

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In early March, I decided not to attend the 2020 CCCC Convention. It was not worth the risk to myself and my family to travel to Milwaukee. This decision was difficult because I was scheduled to present material at the CCCC Convention and the TYCA event. Instead, I moved on to a new chapter in my career that included remote teaching and the documentation of the experiences intended to keep education alive for many students. It is difficult to adequately summarize the psychological state I was in during this early period. My schools shut down one week before the convention was set to start, so the period of the Documentarian activity took place in the midst of what I call my “fog phase.” Although I agreed to maintain my role as a Documentarian, I found it hard to concentrate on the daily tasks of recording my experiences. However, this activity did help to keep me focused at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I am thankful that I captured these thoughts.

I saw my Documentarian role as an essential part of the “commonplace” dialogue set to take place. My presentation for the CCCC covered the idea of creating a “safe place” in my classroom where students are free to discuss the fears and challenges of attending college. The 2020 CCCC Convention was an event where I could discuss commonality and inclusiveness not only for students but for all of us in higher education. Shifting to the online platform, forced us to create this “commonplace” in a virtual setting, and our feedback might serve to connect and influence other professionals in our discipline. Ironically, only a handful of participants accepted the challenge to document this unprecedented time in our history.

My position as an adjunct instructor does not always provide the opportunity for me to take part in a reflective discussion or share my perspectives with the department. I teach at four public colleges. I am a freeway flier, and although I do not have the coveted tenure, I still aim to “share the vision,” make my “voice” known, and take part in the

collegial behavior of the department. I attend conferences to network with my peers and learn from them, but we also need to have access to the entire collegial conversation. Nathan F. Alleman and Don Haviland characterize my actions by claiming that part-time faculty, “recognized and valued informal venues that validated their sense of professional voice and belonging overall as important to creating a collegial environment” (537). Contingent faculty desire collegiality, but we lack this membership and don’t have the same level of interconnectedness within our respective departments. My teaching status is the premise for my engagement with the CCCC community because I have greater access to diverse thoughts and ideas than in my home organizations. My Documentarian activity provided an excellent avenue to share with others my pandemic ordeal during this time of uncertainty.

I woke each day in disbelief and functioned in a fog. As the COVID-19 situation unfurled, I could not grasp my inner feelings nor the magnitude of this sudden catastrophe. Everything seemed surreal, and there was nowhere to hide from this *Twilight Zone* episode. I knew this was coming—I had warned my face-to-face classes to prepare for virtual instruction. We tested the process to access Zoom sessions, I reminded them to check Canvas often, and I told them to stay focused. I reassured them that I cared about them and that they should contact me with any issues they encountered so that I could help them through the course. Like a mother preparing her children for school, I armed them with advice to navigate the coming waves and torrents of the “thing” that none of us had ever experienced. I wasn’t scared, nor was I prepared for my rollercoaster of emotions that would unfold in the coming weeks, including the trauma about to creep into our lives.

Trauma is real, and we have all been traumatized by this pandemic—it was a lost job, it was a disabled student thrown into a course he never asked to be in, it was a family living in close quarters and enduring the volatile emotions that come from being “caged in.” Yet within this madness, we were asked to teach and get our students to the finish line. Those of us experienced in teaching online courses were asked to help other faculty get up to speed in a matter of days. Ironically, many of us called to action were from the contingent staff, and we willingly obliged for multiple reasons. As Alleman and Haviland state, “lack of long-term job security and their desire to contribute to shared departmental goals often made

NTTF [Non-Tenure-Track Faculty] easy to exploit since they had dual incentives to capitulate to departmental asks and expectations” (540). Our desire to engage while protecting our positions drove us to action. The department was in triage mode with the urgent cries of “help me figure out ZOOM!” “How do I create online quizzes?” “How do I keep kids from cheating?”; and the list goes on.

Interestingly enough, in our panic, we did not see the world entirely through the eyes of our students. We tried to patch things together to get our work done and worried about our teaching needs over our student outcomes. It was not until I began the Documentarian role that I realized my teaching approaches needed some adjustment. This trauma put us in survival mode; it scarred us, but it also strengthened us.

#### DOCUMENTARIAN EXPERIENCE

I planned on an active schedule during the CCCC Annual Convention, and at a minimum would have taken part in the following manner:

- Wednesday morning would have been spent at the TYCA event, and I would have presented material on the topic of Student Retention.
- On Thursday, I would have gotten up early and walked to the venue for the General Opening Session of the convention, scanned the program for presentations that covered First-Year Writing topics, and taken part in some networking opportunities
- On Friday, I would have delivered my presentation on College Student Fear Factors, followed by visiting the poster session and taking part in some dialogue with the poster presenters. The next stop would have been to the publishers’ exhibits to examine new offerings for the upcoming academic year. By the end of my day, I would have felt pleased that my presentation had taken place.
- Finally, on the last day of the convention, my time would have been spent attending one or two events, and then I would have headed to the airport to return to Los Angeles. On the plane trip, I probably would have reflected on the entire convention and the networking that took place. I enjoy networking with others, where I can learn from my colleagues and share my ideas. This knowledge assures me that we all have the same passions and interests, regardless of where we teach.

Instead, pandemic activity shaped my week in ways I had never imagined. The week brought challenges and successes in various ways.

- On Wednesday, I spent time redesigning four courses for online learning. As a “Freeway Flier,” I work at multiple schools, and one school only allowed three days to convert our courses to an online format. To this day, I can only say that I worked in a numbed state of mind. These days reminded me of the days when my father died, because there was the same sense of sudden loss and trauma; life would never be the same. I knew I had to plow my way through personal and professional obstacles to lay the groundwork for the next ten weeks. There was “noise” everywhere because four colleges kept reminding me to take care of our student needs beyond academic work. But wait!
  - Who was taking care of us (teachers)?
  - Why was it up to me to make sure they (students) were taken care of?
  - Aren’t they adults? Can’t they take care of themselves?
  - I have needs too!

“Stay at Home” orders came on this day. Now I was confined to my home with limited access to peers and academic dialogue. I pushed myself to concentrate and create content that would be accessible for students who were already “at-risk” in my courses. I had one course working through a five-week job-shadowing activity. Those students had to get to the finish line and successfully meet the course learning outcomes. In my Wednesday evening post, I wrote: “Honestly, I am exhausted from the amount of news and trying to make sure my content is going to really help my students.”

- Thursday was not much different from Wednesday. I spent my day at the kitchen table, where I prepped courses and graded midterms. The daily news and email storms derailed me, so I limited my access to those outlets. I had joined a “pandemic teacher” group on social media, but that proved to do more harm than good, because it was a lot of “panic” chatter and whining about the situation. My schools were offering numerous webinars on remote teaching, but it was overwhelming to teach and attend “professional development” sessions. Managing the barrage of in-

put becomes an everyday challenge to stay sane and not succumb to data overload. My day closed with the following thoughts: “I am feeling pretty good in terms of getting my classes in shape. I fell behind when trying to process world events, and now I feel relieved that I am nearly caught up.”

- On Friday, I continued to work in a “vacuum” with little interaction with my colleagues. I saw a post on social media that discussed the challenges of not having an actual home office—I am one of those persons. It was hard to concentrate when televisions were blaring, and other family members were vying for workspace. Staying focused was not easy, and I looked for an accomplishment to celebrate every night to avoid getting caught up in a downward spiral. My day ended with this thought: “I feel quite accomplished and relieved that I made big gains in the prepping of my courses for the remainder of the year.”
- Saturday brought the end to the Documentarian journaling activity. This day was a day of random action, because I needed a break from my usual structure. The weather was good so, I took a longer than usual walk to get fresh air while clearing my mind of the issues of the week. I completed a few school-related tasks. Not much to write about today—just a day to unwind and reflect. I noted in my Documentarian feedback that I had gotten tired of answering the same questions each day. I was tired of the monotony of the task given the limited opportunities we had in the “Stay at Home” mode. I did manage to end the day on a positive note with the following thought: “I feel pretty good about my day because I split my day pretty evenly between school and home activity.”

Small accomplishments kept me moving:

- I spent the entire week making sure all my courses were fully prepared to “run” in the new model. During the week, I converted four courses from the face-to-face mode into online learning communities. I added some “extras” to these courses by curating some open sources that would help my students grasp concepts in a way other than reading texts and PowerPoint charts.
- The accomplishments for the week included Zoom sessions with my high-risk students and a feeling of some control. In each session, I made sure to provide a warm welcome to our new mode

of learning, reassurance for those who felt uncomfortable in the new format, and I did my best to ask about their well-being before the start of our virtual instruction. I was conducting a balancing act between students who were comfortable in an online environment and students who were not prepared for this new environment. I spent a lot of energy coaxing the students to stay engaged, but I was competing with students who suddenly lost jobs, students who now worked overtime, students with children, and students who became ill with COVID-19. These problems became part of this learning situation.

#### POST REFLECTION

I chose to write from my usual workspace at home. Even with the “Stay at Home” measures, I maintained most of my usual routines to remain grounded. I usually teach about four classes in an online learning environment, so the cut-over to entirely online instruction was not too difficult. I have a schedule that helps me stay ahead of the demands of an online class. Since I am an introvert, a focused routine helps me “re-charge.” This routine is essential to my thought process because it provides a sense of control. When I am “re-charged,” I can focus on my tasks, including my writing and emotions.

Initially, I believed my emotions were pretty static during this journey, with only a few fluctuations. Now, I suspect I may have been hiding my inner feelings because too many people depended on me. So, while I felt my mindset was positive, I speculate that I was masking my emotions as a type of defense mechanism. In reality, my mind was all over the place. By the end of the week, I did find the Documentarian survey a little monotonous because my activity did not change. The “Stay at Home” orders contributed to a sense of isolation and did not allow for much deviation to report.

Working in isolation prompted me to take a closer look at my teaching goals. I have high expectations for myself and my students. I was a high performing student, and I believed all students had the same calling. But now that we were all on the same playing field of “the unknown,” I began to rethink my priorities and expectations. I thought about the impact my course materials and assignments had on my students. Perhaps, I was unreasonable in some of my assumptions about student preparedness and inner drive. I recalled a comment made by a colleague who stated that all of our years of learning

and teaching made us experts, but we can't expect our students to have that same expertise that took us years to build. I spent time reflecting on my philosophy and adjusted assignments to meet the educational need based on the student population and course outcomes. Since I expect my students to reflect on their work, so should I.

Along with assessing my expectations, I contemplated my pedagogy. I realized that my classroom “top-down” approach that hinges on lectures and “pushing” out information led in-class students to be overly dependent on me. I am successful with the online students when it comes to dialogue and collaboration, but not as successful with the in-class courses. Student engagement became a problem when I tried to switch in-class students to practices that were not familiar to them. I need to use activities in the classroom that I use with online students. I also recognized some of my online course material could be more thorough in detail for ease of completion. Typically, I use open-ended instruction and various collaboration assignments in both formats, but I realized I need to incorporate more meaningful inquiry and experiential learning activities in all my courses. I had grown complacent with my approach, and this needed to change. I have a lot of work ahead of me to revamp my courses for better retention and student success. This reflection has served as an “energizer” for me.

#### RETROSPECTIVE

We are still in an “Uncommon Time,” but now that we have reached the end of the spring pandemic semester of learning, I can say that I have grown as a writer and a teacher. I was in the same survival mode as my students. The uncertainty had its traumatic effects on us, and not knowing the next steps in our day-to-day living was challenging for me. I could imagine my students sharing the same challenges, so I worked at creating assignments with meaningful rhetoric, and I worked to alter my way of communication. I carefully chose my words to form clear, student-teacher correspondence. I was deliberate in my dialogue, and I learned to listen to myself more closely as I directed my students through this learning experience.

Sharing my story may help others realize that during this time, we may have had similar emotions and experiences. This type of knowledge is vital for many of us—especially those of us who are contingent faculty and of various ethnic backgrounds. My “temporary” status puts me in a different category than those who have tenure. This faculty

divide was evident in the demographics of this activity. As I reviewed the demographics, I was disappointed though not surprised by the contributors to this data collection. We need a well-rounded group of educators to keep this data from being biased, yet over 70% of the Documentarians were part-time educators. I wonder why we did not get a more significant contribution from the tenured faculty. There is an unspoken divide that I often witness between “full-time” professors and contingent faculty in my teaching institutions. In a study conducted in 2017, Cipriano and Buller support this observation by stating that “a third or more of the [study] respondents observed a decline in collegiality—sometimes moderate and sometimes severe—as faculty members moved from untenured to tenured positions or from teaching and research roles to administrative roles” (16). Can we assume this perception of tenured faculty to be accurate? Within the academy, we need to ensure there is a collaborative mindset among all levels of teaching status and demographics. I can attest to being shut out of a SIG meeting at the 2019 CCCC Convention because I was not a member of that community, and this was a disheartening incident.

I hope that the next generation of Documentarians will include tenured educators who are willing to take their time to share their experiences from their secured positions. Our profession will become more robust and more equitable when all parties come to the table to share knowledge, expertise, and creative dialogue.

#### CONCLUSION

CCCC 2020 is history, and education was turned on its head. Some of us fared better than others, and we have all come away with some battle wounds and lessons learned. I have learned that all my students need a better structure in the remote learning environment to succeed. I also learned that we could not “save” everyone, and it’s okay to let some students go. Some of my “high-risk” students stopped participating, and this included a student living in a half-way house who showed great promise. I am spending the summer researching high-risk students in online learning communities to meet their needs in the upcoming school terms. The fall will provide another opportunity for me to get things right for our students.

Going forward, we need to reconcile the needs of contingent faculty to ensure there is no burnout. Attending to students’ personal



issues and academic demands was exhausting to accommodate. If I were a tenured teacher and only taught at one institution, this might have been manageable. But this is not the reality of the “Freeway Flier.” I balanced eight courses during this crisis, and it took a significant toll on my well-being. We can’t expect teachers to embrace all student issues, yet this was an ask by my administration. Too much bend and shift to accommodate student requests will break the teacher. Is it worth the effort to teach in these insane circumstances? Will contingent faculty be recognized for “plugging” the holes? Only time will tell, but despite the unknown, most of us will be back online because we care about education and student success.

Was I as positive as I earlier mentioned? Probably not. But it was a way for me to compartmentalize the many emotions I experienced during this time in our lives. Earlier, I said that this *Twilight Zone* episode reminded me of the death of my father. Shock, disbelief, sadness, survival—it was a packaged deal. Ultimately, we moved on to the “new normal,” and I wistfully looked at “what was.”

#### WORKS CITED

- Alleman, Nathan, and Don Haviland. “I Expect to Be Engaged as an Equal: Collegiality Expectations of Full-Time, Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Members.” *Higher Education*, vol. 74, no. 3, Sept. 2017, pp. 527–42, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0062-4>.
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