

“You Good, Fam’?”: Mindful Journaling and Africana Digital Dialogic Compassionate Rhetorical Response Pedagogy during a Pandemic

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I think our notions of what counts as radical have changed over time. Self-care and healing and attention to the body and the spiritual dimension—all of this is now a part of radical social justice struggles.

—Angela Davis

Despite my disappointment of being unable to fulfill my original duties as a Documentarian for the Conference on College Composition and Communication Convention in 2020, my new role, as a result of the worldwide pandemic, had far more reaching consequences for my students and for me. When I first learned of the new responsibilities as Documentarian of 4Cs, one that required participants to journal about our daily experiences during quarantine when we would have otherwise been attending the conference, I was eager to participate. I maintain a business documenting stories of Black women’s wellness and teach courses on meditative and mindful journaling in the community, so, needless to say, I am well versed in the mental, physical, spiritual, and communal benefits of reflective writing. Likewise, the framework of Africana womanism, which is rooted in holistic nurturing, has shaped my research and my pedagogical practice as a professor of writing in College Composition for over twenty years.

This new role, as a Documentarian of uncommon times, however, compelled me to slow down and deepen my writing and pedagogical praxis. Reflective and mindful journaling in a moment of actualized trauma, heightened my personal self-care practice, as well as my Africana womanist pedagogical outlook on care in the classroom, allowing me to be more present to my students’ wellbeing and prioritizing the process of their writing over the growth and goals of their writing.

During a period of crisis, this new role, and the circumstances surrounding it, elevated my consciousness on student needs and my attention to their cognitive processes. It also grounded me in unexpected ways and allowed me to be a keener observer. These observations rooted me in the work of sacred writing and allowed me to engage in digital dialogic compassionate writing responses, both in my rhetorical responses to student writing and in personal written correspondence with them. Daily journaling of the chaos that was taking place in my own home, in my community, in the US, and in the world at the precise moment it was happening helped redirect my attention from grading and correcting to connecting and checking in, as I began personal digital dialogs with my students. In this way, I not only documented what was happening with me and my family during the initial quarantine, but also what was happening with my students and their families, and it altered my approach to teaching composition throughout the course of the semester.

The prompts that were given to us were similar to those in mindful and meditative journaling, which asks its practitioners to ground ourselves in the present before the act of writing begins. Similar to yoga, when participants are asked to feel their feet "grounding" to the mat or feel their sit-bones connecting with the earth, grounding requires that the practitioner becomes aware of the present moment, without judgment, so that in turn they remain flexible and fluid (Wenger). The 4Cs daily morning survey prompts asked questions like: "Describe the scene around you. Where are you in it? What do you see, hear, and smell?" These were questions of mindfulness, calling me to ground myself where I was and observe without judgment. Scott R. Bishop and his team of researchers on Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) maintained that mindfulness initiates a change in perspective when we are attentive to our inner experiences so that, "in a state of mindfulness, thoughts and feelings are observed as events in the mind, without over-identifying with them, and without reacting to them in an automatic, habitual pattern of reactivity" (Bishop et al. 232). Mindfulness allows space, then, for connective contemplation and breaking habitual, rote responses in exchange for a new outlook or fresh perspective.

Comparably, Mezirow's Theory of Transformative Learning teaches us that deep critical self-reflection, which transcends content knowledge achievement, raises our consciousness and aids in meaning

making and effecting change, often in the spirit of social justice. Transformation, he explains, begins when one experiences a "disorienting dilemma" that sparks a pivot in thinking and an embrace of a possible self, one that requires a shedding or letting go of existing perspectives (22). In order to expand, however, old frameworks and habits of the mind must be replaced with new possibilities that rest in the hopefulness of change (hooks).

In response to the daily 4Cs survey, in the mornings I could be found sitting still, alone, coffee in hand, in the lush garden of a family matriarch in Miami. I would go there to do my morning rituals and prayers to my ancestors before the tsunami of anxiety and chaos came barreling toward me once my family awakened. There, I would pour libations, sing to my ancestors, conjure their energy, and ask of them, "What is mine to do?" as I recalled a litany of traumas they had overcome starting with the Middle Passage. Like Alice Walker, I felt myself longing for comfort, nurturing, and modeling in my [mother in-law's] garden. I was looking to the past to make sense out of my current circumstances and to create something new. It was in the garden where I grounded myself and tended to my own self-care before I was bombarded with non-stop media updates from elders in my family and WhatsApp notifications from worried friends, "Girl, did you see there were six confirmed cases at Nova? It's all over the news!" It's where I could catch my breath before I had to take on the role of provider, mother, counselor, second-grade teacher, professor, faculty advisor, etc. In the stillness of dawn, I listened intently to the chorus of morning songbirds and hooting owls. I witnessed the mango trees bearing unripened fruit.

These observations were reminders that I was part of a larger ecosystem, that I was connected to something much greater than myself, and that the earth was still and bountiful. The birds were carrying on with their daily lives, aloof to the president's latest briefing or predictions by "America's doctor." They weren't keeping track of death tolls and rising positive tests. They were simply in a state of being and for a few brief moments I was there with them. As a practitioner and priestess of an African Diasporic Religion (ADR), connecting with nature is an essential component of my spiritual practice and in "owning that space [there comes an] understanding that we have this intricate relationship with the divine, [and a partnership] with our brilliant selves . . ." (Harris 252). In these moments, I also envisioned my students and what

they might be waking up to, what thoughts and scenes they might encounter, and I took a moment to silently acknowledge their circumstances. Although I wanted to be as productive as possible each day, my thoughts kept coming back to my students and their wellbeing.

Miller and Nozawa suggested that Loving Kindness Meditation is "ultimately, a meditation on how we are connected to people, animals, life, and all creation" (51). They raised the possibility that certain forms of meditation may serve to create or enhance direct pathways to love, care and concern between teachers and their students. Such a possibility could potentially shift away from a "stress-reduction" model of trying to control stressful emotions and toward exploring how teachers broaden their sense of interconnectedness with students and teaching environments.

Historically, for many Black women teachers, mobilizing this kind of care has become an act of preservation for "selves, communities, and social worlds" (Hobart and Kneese 2). This kind of radical care was not new to me, as I had long identified as an Africana womanist for many years throughout my career, but never had the feeling of care and the need to act/feel so visceral. In her article, "A Womanist Experience of Caring: Understanding the Pedagogy of Exemplary Black Women Teachers," Beauboeuf-Lafontant maintains that womanist caring is exemplified in the traditional role of the Africana teacher. She also outlines three characteristics of the pedagogy, including embracing the maternal, political clarity, and ethic of risk. Through an amalgamation of these three characteristics, Black women historically view "caring and mothering in [a] larger socio-historical [realm] . . . [and] in sharing knowledge we can also share power" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 283). Likewise, journaling after pouring libations and paying homage to my ancestors helped me to make meaning out of the urge to connect with my students who were at the moment, all "at-risk."

My background in Africana womanism, coupled with journaling and self-reflection in the space of my spiritual practice, informed my teaching during the crisis in ways that sought to shelter my students by providing structure in the midst of adversity and preventing as much social and institutional failure as I could. In doing so, I resisted the entrapment of a mainstream, patriarchal, and disconnected notion of teaching and production—like the popular meme on the productivity of Isaac Newton and his development of calculus during the plague, which circulated social media during the onset of the pandemic and

instead sought connectedness through digital dialogue with my students. Journaling, then, provided a sacred space, where I was able to remain attached: to my body, to the community, to the collective as opposed to fragmented, detached, and disconnected.

My concern was for the whole student not just for their academic wellbeing. I needed to convey to them in that moment, "I am not going to give up on you, I am not going to let you give up on yourself" (Dweck 2003). Traditionally, caring in the Black family has been connected to what is happening in society by acknowledging struggles and sharing knowledge that gives the youth agency to resist oppression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant). In word and deed Black teachers express love for students by acknowledging the injustice that is happening around them while simultaneously manifesting the divinity within ourselves and honoring that same divinity in our students; acknowledging their strengths, their gifts, their talents, issues that are important to them. It seeks intimacy with and not aloofness to students, even though success is not guaranteed. Nevertheless, this kind of familial intimacy with students seeks to empower them, especially in times of struggle.

By the onset of the pandemic, nearly all of my students were feeling disenfranchised, uncertain, and traumatized. Overnight and without warning, their in-person classes ended abruptly and they were given three days to leave campus; to leave their independence, to leave their friends, to leave their dorm, to leave their student organizations, to leave their teammates, to leave their coaches, or to leave their host country. Those who returned home were now sharing spaces with their parents and siblings around the clock. They were sharing computers. Some became essential workers, taking on forty- to fifty-hour shifts in supermarkets to help out around the house. I had seventy-five eighteen-year-olds who were counting on me to not let them down and now I was challenged with maintaining connection and engagement virtually during a global pandemic. No problem.

Early on, it became apparent that some of my brightest students were struggling in this new online environment, as none of them had signed up for a distance learning experience. Likewise, my role as a writing instructor was intensifying literally overnight and I needed to make sure that any changes mid-semester were done in a student-centered manner with humanization and connection at the core. I had long adopted hooks's notion of engaged pedagogy and teaching

to transgress by being authentic, present in the body, and encouraging students to move about the classroom creatively as well, but engaging students was proving to be challenging given our new circumstances. Everything went to a traditional online setting to immediately accommodate students who were now suddenly in different time zones or even countries. This meant that the social community we had spent ten weeks building was completely dismantled. As educators, we know that the social dimension of using our senses in a classroom and in our bodies are different once we shift to online learning. In face-to-face learning, both student and teacher are aware of audible and visual clues by each other. Online, students need to know that they are dealing with a human on the other end of cyberspace and this happens most often through digital dialog. For example, if students do not contribute to the discussion board, we have very little way of knowing if they have attended class or not and neither do the students.

I could sense students retreating behind the black boxes of our Zoom virtual classrooms, as most of them turned their cameras off. We began meeting live via Zoom a few days a week and I was offering office hours via that same platform, but most students had grown silent and stopped engaging. That's when I turned to email. I decided that first week that I would send virtual professor-pal messages to all seventy-five students. I personalized my notes and let my students know that I was thinking about them and their families. I wondered how they were doing—if they were well, mentally and physically, and if all of their needs were met. I didn't leave that up to administrators. I asked questions like, "How are you? How's your team doing? Are you able to work out? Can you get fresh air? Is the weather suitable?"

Being present meant more than checking to make sure they were discussing today's topic on the discussion board, it meant being fully present to their socio-historical experience, embodying the spirit of African womanism in a moment of crisis. As an "othermother" (hooks), I needed to know that my children were okay. I could not just act as if what was happening was normal and then say, "Okay kids, let's turn to page 35 of our textbooks and start chapter 2." None of us will ever be the same after this experience and I had to acknowledge where we were in the process. My "checking in" email was my proverbial, "You good, fam?" question acknowledging a familial bond, but not necessarily by blood, and one that asks, "how are you feeling in your soul?"

To my surprise, every one of my students wrote back to me and most commented on how much they appreciated the personal communication:

Student: I am doing as well as I could possibly be doing considering the circumstances. As a procrastinator at heart, online school would never be my first choice but I'm making do. I appreciate you reaching out!

I hope all is well with you. I know that I have been driving my parents crazy in our circumstantial house arrest, so I'm sending you all the vibes of patience and strength in this time when you have to focus on work as well as a child.

Thank you so much for reaching out! The effort you're making to make this "new normal" as smooth as possible is not lost on me.

Student: Hi Dr. Panton, hope all is well. At the moment, we're just working on articles for the orientation issue, nothing too fun :). I work at Publix too, and have been working 40-45 hour weeks with everything going on . . . *I appreciate you reaching out, not a lot of teachers have done that so it means a lot.* Stay safe and hopefully see you when we get back or next semester!

Student: Good Evening! . . . This transition is very tough, but I know that everyone is struggling. I'm hoping we get to come back to Nova one last time. Thank you so much for reaching out, it truly means a lot. I hope you are safe as well, and not too stressed with these course changes.

Student: Hello Professor Panton, I am doing well. Still trying to get everything together, unfortunately I have been a little behind. My job selected a few employees to continue to work throughout this pandemic, so I have been working nonstop. My family is doing well and are trying to take precautions. Thank you so much for checking up, I appreciate it. You are the only professor I have that has expressed concern.

My students' heartfelt responses informed my pedagogical practices moving forward. Collins explains that, "for Black women new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community" (212). By reaching out to my students, my community, to inquire about their wholeness, I not only gained insight on their wellbeing, but also on their need for more compassion.

Despite my esoteric aspirations, however, I needed to grade. Journaling about it and receiving feedback from my students, however, helped me to move forward in a way that felt comfortable for me and fair for my students. I decided that I would take a compassionate approach to grading as well as in my rhetorical responses to their work. I could not be in my garden grounding myself through meditation and journaling and not pass on to my students the same comfort and nurturing I was seeking. Typically, I mark their papers on every page, highlight structural or grammatical patterns of error and attach a rubric that I fill in, commenting on critical thinking, content, organization, and language. All of a sudden, the usual feedback seemed like too much to dispense and too much for them to receive. I needed to grade but I focused on three holistic areas: The most effective area, the least effective area, and a suggestion in the form of a question. This approach made students aware of what was working, what needed improvement, and questions to consider for revision. I also began with encouragement:

You're doing such a great job of staying focused through all of this, Javier! The most effective part of this report is your methods section, as well as your observation data in the results section.

The least effective areas are the connections between international students and team camaraderie. Is there any secondary literature that could better connect the two ideas? Would it be better to discuss just camaraderie among team members?

You got this. Fins up!

By not focusing on checking all of the boxes in my rubric, my hope was that this approach would lessen the overwhelm students were feeling and would engage them more in the process of their writing.

The goal of compassionate dialogic writing response pedagogy, as I understand it, is to help students feel less estranged from writing and to provide kind and helpful feedback. It also serves to allow the students to have voices and choices in their writing, instead of feeling silenced, judged and directed to write what the teacher wants. Compassionate Writing Response (CWR), then, aims to align itself with best practices of commentary in that comments are "Turn[ed into] conversation . . . do not take control of student's text . . . gives priority to global concerns . . . limits the scope of comments . . . gears comments

to the individual student . . . and makes frequent use of praise." It also seeks to "establish relationships based on honesty and empathy that will eventually fulfill everyone's needs" (Macklin 5). In this way, CWR seeks to ask how we as teachers can help students learn instead of assuming that we already know. In our most recent moments of crisis, I had to admit to myself that I did not know what would be most helpful in the learning process of my students and I had to be willing to engage in dialogue with them to find out.

The Documentarian role of 4Cs 2020 facilitated critical self-reflection and meaningful connections with my students and my praxis. Documenting the onset of the pandemic through mindful journaling fostered stillness and grounding, in the midst of complete chaos, that tested my role as an Africana womanist practitioner and compelled me to consider the mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing of my students more than ever at a crucial moment. It also allowed for sacred space to explore and elevate my existing spiritual and teaching practices to include a digital dialogic pedagogy that is congruent with the core ideals of connection and empowerment in Black women's liberatory pedagogies.

After the semester ended, I continued my journaling practice as it regarded my teaching and spent the entire summer creating an entirely new syllabus based on our current socio-historical circumstances and one that focuses on the processes of student writing rather than the production of student writing. This new course and syllabus on the rhetoric of health and wellness allows students the space to participate in low stakes mindful journaling and also facilitates documentation of the pandemic and the rhetoric of it as it is unfolding. My hope is to provide a nurturing environment where my students feel empowered through writing assignments and discourse that allow for mindfulness, compassion, and empathy in a world that desperately needs it right now.

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