

Stories and Strategies: Pandemic Lessons about Learning Online

Kathi Yancey and Doug Hesse

Doug: The Story of Spring: Only Partly the Story of Fall

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Photo Doug Hesse



Four Student Voices

Students in an elective Memoir Writing class wrote about a slice of their lives during the current pandemic. Following are four samples. *Doug Hesse*

"Hazy Reflections on the Shower Wall"
Paige Grover, Third Year Studio Art

. . . .I'm eating ice cream sandwiches like Klondike laced them with something, and I'm taking more showers. I shame myself for the amount of water I use for nothing. When I was young and sick with strep throat, which happened at least once a year, I would wake my mother in the middle of the night, throat searing, and she would sit me in her shower, turn the water really warm, and sit on the toilet seat as steam filled the room.

Sometimes there's not much else to do but sit in the shower and watch the tiled wall dissolve into a million reflections that you can never make out. Or spend a long time figuring out how to write "watch steam fill the room," but in a *poetic* way. I'm reminded of my mother's bed sheets as I wash mine; the muted metallic green or bronze of them, the softness of them against freshly shaven legs, the smell of her in them. To what have people pressed their faces, to try and inhale me again? . . .



"No Longer a Room of Her Own"

Sophie Gordon, First Year English and Literary Arts

I wasn't sad until I had to turn in my keys. I wasn't sad when I got the email saying that we had to go. I wasn't sad when my suitemate Emelia came into the kitchen telling me that they had boxes downstairs and the line was getting long. I think I was panicked and shocked. But when I had to give my keys to my RA, when I grabbed my last two succulents, when I walked out of the first place I had made a home for myself? Then I was sad.

Don't get me wrong, I have a home. But my dorm room, despite its small space shared with somebody else, was a slice of a life I had never had before, away from my family, from their joys and from their burdens in a small apartment. . . .

My mother is a fourth-grade teacher who is now expected to teach 16 ten-year-olds on Zoom. I can't begin to explain the impossibility of this task, which is compounded by her ineptness with technology. I'm not exaggerating my own importance when I say, in all honesty, she could not be doing this without me.

Subject: Writing at DU: News, Resources, & Student Voices
Date: Thursday, April 30, 2020 at 12:34:32 PM Mountain Daylight Time
From: DU Writing Program
To: Douglas Hesse



Engaged Online

News, Resources, & Student Voices

The May Newsletter from the
DU Writing Program

Visit the Writing Program

Dear Colleagues,
Our May newsletter features:

- A Report on Spring Writing Courses
- How the Writing Center Can Help Students
- Four Students Write about Life in a Pandemic
- Conversations in the Disciplines: Writing

The Writing Center Online: Supporting Students--and You

Writing scholars have long demonstrated that conversation and peer review are crucial parts of the writing process. Talking with others helps writers learn to make arguments, shape analyses and narratives, and generate new insights. A structured conversation with a peer is a powerful learning moment.



This quarter, fewer than ever have happened, meaning maintaining English classes for years, interacting

We also [resources](#) to bring with us and as

Four

Students Writing their lives during the current pandemic. Following are four samples. *Doug Hesse*

"Hazy Reflections on the Shower Wall" Paige Grover, Third Year Studio Art

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High Impact Online: About Spring Writing Courses

All spring 2020 writing sections are full, with 86% of our students highly engaged. All writing professors have reached out multiple times to individual students, who report relatively few technological problems but understandably more challenges in learning and social environments.

Those are just some of the many findings in two surveys completed by 26 writing faculty, who described their online course designs and perceptions of 1100 first year students. Only about half of writing sections have synchronous whole-class meetings, generally once a week. However, faculty are engaging individual students regularly by Zoom, phone, or personal emails. Asynchronous discussions and peer review happen weekly or biweekly in over 90% of WRIT sections. Teaching is clearly much more time-consuming than in

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To read all of Paige's piece, please see [Hazy Reflections](#)

May 2020
Writing Program Newsletter
(Fear not!
You don't need to read screen!)

"No Longer a Room of Her Own" Sophie Gordon, First Year English and Literary Arts

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Memoir and Personal Writing



Warm up week

Weeks 2-7

6 weekly exercises in technique (500-750 each)

6 weekly response analyses (500-750 each)

Weeks 8, 9, 10, Finals

3 polished pieces (5000 total)

One-hour synchronous class (News and reactions)

Optional small group work in progress

- Bradway and Hesse, *Creating Nonfiction*, excerpts
- Kristen Iversen, *Full Body Burden*
- Rebecca Solnit, ed, *The Best American Essays 2019*
- Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*

Four Fast Lessons

Tiered Synchronicity

The Humanity of Sharing

The Humanity of Structured Tolerance

The Debilitation of Overcompensating

177 words: professor/student/week

177 words: professor/student/week

A first year WRIT 1133 student: Four weeks in the DU dorm, alone and sheltering in place, while waiting to get home because of international travel regulations. And then two weeks under quarantine in Beijing. Six weeks out of 10, under lockdown. His ethnography on American Buddhism, bolstered by interviews with practicing American Buddhists, was impressive. [He] earned an A- in WRIT 1133. I hope he comes back in the Fall.

-Brad Benz



A student from Baltimore wanted to learn everything she could about Freddie Gray's death (and the police culture that produced it). Her connection to place – and living at home – made it easier for her to dig deep into a variety of local news sources, and her qualitative study based on a lucky interview she caught with a Baltimore police captain was incredibly thoughtful.... the resulting piece was incredibly powerful, not only deftly synthesizing her academic research, but also telling a complex story with nuance and compassion in a way that makes that work (on a difficult topic) accessible to a wide range of audiences.

-Libby Catchings



One student who had moved back home with family for the quarter was researching the influence of food insecurity in her home community: The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. She was able to conduct an in-depth interview with an elder in her tribe as well as a broad-reaching survey on food insecurity and gathered about 350 responses, which is double and even triple what most students are able to do in a single quarter. [Her] primary research, her interview report, her survey report, and her eventual argumentative essay were greatly improved by her being closely and physically embedded in her home community this quarter.

--Aubrey Schiavone





Advice 1

Make the course the course.

Strategies, Principles, Habit Processes

Recognize times and topics beyond pandemics.

My whiteness started becoming more apparent to me in middle school, which at that time I found harmless. When people found out that I was actually Mexican, the first words out of their mouth were "Prove it. Say something in Spanish." This was actually some fun at first. In some weird twisted way, it was as if fate had granted me through my Mexican ancestry an invisibility cloak with which I could perform the coolest magic trick. Watch the white boy speak Spanish. But after performing the same magic trick for many years, it has gotten quite old.

. . .

Harlem Renaissance author Nella Larsen was all too familiar with this phenomenon of "passing." The daughter of a Danish mother and Black father, Larsen was light enough to enter "white-only" spaces during segregation without being questioned but could also just as easily mingle in black spaces. Her novels *Passing* and *Quicksand* chronicle this fine line of perception; a balancing act in fictitious categories.

My cloak of invisibility, which I've grown to resent, is faulty though, as evidenced by the confusion I've caused countless Uber drivers. "So, what kind of Asian are you? Filipino? Vietnamese?" they'd say. "Where is your accent from?" "You're white mixed with what?" Or, as a woman with a concerned look once asked me in Michaels, "do you speak English?"

--Daniel



Advice 2

- Figure the fullness of writers/scholars, including the fullness of students.
- We're not merely screen beings.
- Figure your own teaching fullness.

Photo: Doug Hesse



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Points West



By Joan Didion
and John Gregory Dunne

Going home

I am home for my daughter's first birthday. By "home" I do not mean the house in Los Angeles where my husband and I and the baby live, but the place where my family is, Sacramento. It is a vital although troublesome distinction. My husband likes my family but is uneasy in Sacramento, because once there I fall into my family's ways, which are difficult, oblique, deliberately inarticulate, not my husband's ways. We live in Sacramento in dusty houses ("D-U-S-T," he once wrote with his finger on surfaces all over the house, but no one noticed it) filled with mementos quite without value to him (What could the Canton dessert plates mean to him? How could he have known about the assay scales, why should he care if he did?), and we appear to talk exclusively about people we know who have been committed to mental hospitals, about people we know who have been booked on drunk-driving charges, and about property, particularly about property, land, price per acre and zoning and assessments and freeway access. My brother does not understand my husband's inability to perceive the advantage in the rather common real-estate transaction known as "sale-leaseback," and my husband in turn does not understand why so many of the people he hears about in Sacramento have recently been committed to mental hospitals or booked on drunk-driving charges. Nor does he understand that when we talk about sale-leasebacks and right-of-way condemnations we are talking in code about the things we like best, the yellow fields and the cottonwoods and the rivers rising and falling and the mountain roads closing when the heavy snow comes in. We miss each other's points, have drinks and regard the fire. Marriage is the classic betrayal.

Or perhaps it is not anymore. Sometimes I think that those of us who are in our 30's now were born into the last generation to carry the burden of "home," to find in family life the source of all tension and drama. The question of whether or not you could go home again was a very real part of the sentimental and largely literary baggage with which we left home in the '50's; I suspect that it is irrelevant to the children born of the fragmentation after World War II. A few



Joan Didion and daughter Quintana Roo Photo: Julian Wasser

"Cut Your Own Wood and It Will Warm You Twice"

—Old Chinese Proverb

Maybe three times if you have to clean out the fireplace later.

Aren't things frequently better for us if we have to do them ourselves? For instance, we never really knew the value of money until we had to earn it by hard work.

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Sunday 9/25 morning, front porch

clim watching groups on bicycles going
up to the post, almost always a D. B.

up to the post, almost always a D. B.

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Three openings shared with students:

1. In the summer of 1996, Andrew and I went camping in the Tetons. He was twelve, in seventh grade, and I figured it was a good age to have a father/son trip. We left Normal, Illinois early one August morning in a Dodge Caravan, heading northwest up I74 to I80.

2. In the photograph is a boy and a man, a father and son, and between them is a sign "Signal Mt. Summit Elevation 7593 Ft." The boy is middle school, the man thirty something, and they're wearing red and green hats, with similar (if illegible) logos.

3. In the summer of 1996, I was trying to put my life back together and learn a different way of being a father. The previous year, my wife had suddenly announced she wanted a divorce, after her high school boyfriend reappeared.

People are not only died but trusted
if it feels like summer, it must be
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Advice 2a: Corollary

Resist totalizing
standardization.

or

Prize pied beauty.

Use the course
management system,
mind you, but avoid the
Templating of Learning.





Advice 3

Give of yourself.

But not like Silverstein's tree.