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COVID and the Death of Paper

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I love paper! I'm surrounded by it, at work and at home. I write notes to myself on Post-Its. I write and rewrite to-do lists on legal pads. I write grocery lists on a magnetic pad on the refrigerator. I write reminders on scraps of paper and stick them to my dashboard. I especially love paper books—cookbooks, reference books, novels, poetry, mysteries, tomes on improving my teaching. Bookcases are tucked into unlikely spaces all around my tiny condo.

I remember the moment I realized that my relationship with paper was going to change. Quarantined and working from home, I was on the phone with another professor, discussing what the upcoming fall 2020 semester would be like. She reminded me that giving and receiving paper documents would be off-limits due to COVID concerns. My morale slumped. What was I going to do? Each fall semester I teach College Writing, the required freshman composition course at William Paterson University. I carry around tote bags full of papers. Rough drafts are attached to final revisions with sheets of feedback from classmates. I normally accepted all assignments in paper, required handwritten free-writes and in-class exercises. Students brought multiple copies of their draft essays to peer-review sessions. Paper flowed like an intellectual river through the semester.

I had been teaching the course this way for nearly twenty years. My department is committed to teaching revision in the “writing as process” method championed by Donald Murray and Peter Elbow (among others). While I have worked steadily to upgrade my classroom skills by attending conferences and workshops each year, the

focus on revision—and thus paper—had not changed.

For quite some time I had been considering going electronic. All those trees! We use Blackboard, a web-based course management tool, and I am adept at posting assignments, quizzes, and grades. On the other hand, I resisted electronic first drafts. I believe in the value of the mind-hand connection attained by writing sans keyboard. COVID concerns compelled me to eliminate paper, posting and receiving everything on Blackboard.

At the same time, I knew I would be altering my course to eliminate the textbook. Prior to the pandemic, the English department had decided to strongly discourage the use of textbooks for freshmen level courses. Our student population is often stressed by the cost of college texts, so the decision was understandable. I loved my textbook. Donald Murray's *Write to Learn* had been suggested to me when I first started teaching. The author, who died in 2006, was a figurehead in the writing-as-process movement. His text is filled with personal examples, including stories of his service in World War II. The chapter on internet research is painfully outdated. Yet I was loath to part with the book. One year I switched to a Peter Elbow text. It was a worthy experiment that helped me home in on which critical concepts I wanted students to get, and the next semester I returned to my beloved Murray text with renewed appreciation. After years of teaching a textbook-based course, the shift to no text has made me feel rudderless. I have to redo all my lesson plans and quizzes. The department supplied some open-source

articles to use, which I am rushing to explore.

Making all these changes simultaneously has felt arduous at times. As I scramble to comply with the new normal, the feeling I have is oddly typical. This is, after all, commonplace. So much is adaptation, and yet, so much is the same. My job is constant adjustment, constant reaction. I adapt to the personality of each class. I encourage the strengths and accommodate the weaknesses of the individuals and the group as a whole. Each year I have strived to compensate for the increased intrusion of cell phone distraction in my classroom. As my university experiments with placing freshmen into cohorts based on major, I adjust my examples to their areas of interest. This semester I have all criminal justice majors, most of whom want to go into law enforcement. I talk about the potential writing demands of police officers composing reports about accidents or crimes. Perhaps the ultimate adaptation is to the steady march of my age while my students remain perpetually 18 years old. One semester I realized that most of my students had been born in the year that I started working here. When I started teaching, I was perhaps the same age as their parents. Now I may be the age of their grandparents. I work to off-set the weird dynamic that is the ever-growing gap between our ages. Will I adapt again and return to paper in a post-COVID semester? Who knows?

The pandemic adjustments have been stressful for all of us, but our nature as teachers never changes. We always push to adapt our methods to meet the needs of our students. We serve them to the best of our ability, day after day, year after year. In that way, it's business as usual.