

Building Accessibility, Disabling Labor: Sustainable Models of WPA Work During a Pandemic

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August 2020. A 12-hour day at my computer—another 12-hour day after months of similar days. Today was even more intense, as I'm teaching the composition theory and pedagogy course for new TAs. While I've taught the course many times, because I'm high-risk for COVID, my chair designated the course's modality as synchronous online—my first synchronous online course ever. After a spring and summer of moving the composition program online, building a new FYC Canvas shell, and creating a shared syllabus and assignments that introduce a new curriculum, my right arm, hand, and shoulder—disabled by a traumatic injury I sustained in a fall three years earlier—have been even more painful than usual, and my neck and left shoulder ache. I can't go on like this, I say aloud to myself. I cry myself to sleep that night, the entire upper half of my body in agony.

I will cry myself to sleep for many nights to come.

In January 2021—after eight months of too many days like that one—I took action on a plan I had long considered: developing a Peer Teaching Mentor (PTM) program in which veteran TAs mentor new TAs through monthly, small group meetings called teaching circles. Since I was hired in 2018 as a tenured WPA at Miami University of Ohio—a large, public, doctoral institution offering the MA, MFA, and PhD in English—I had wanted to implement peer teaching mentors and circles (Marshall). However, in Fall 2018 I was newly disabled. I was still recovering from multiple surgeries and medical procedures within a six-month period; I was in physical and occupational therapy 2–3 times a week; I was in psychotherapy to treat the C-PTSD (complex post-traumatic stress disorder) triggered by my fall and medical trauma; I had moved from another state; and my father was dying.

As a result, survival was the goal my first year. In my second year (2019–2020), two graduate WPAs (gWPAs) and I began developing a new curriculum for our first-year writing course and brainstorming strategies for enhancing TA support, particularly beyond TAs' first year. This work was difficult, especially since continuing support and professional development of TAs was not part of our department's culture; while other entities on campus offered workshops and other opportunities, the department did not. There was little money or incentive for professional development, and

there was no mechanism for compelling TAs to participate. Thus, I knew any type of professional development beyond our existing TA training would be a tough sell requiring a cultural shift.

And then came COVID.

As horrible as the pandemic has been, it created a kairotic moment for me to rethink the composition program, my WPA role, and how the program could best support TAs. As Sarah Beam and Mark Rideout argue in “The Writing Program Has COVID” (this volume), during the pandemic WPA work has mutated like a virus, and its illness has been exposed. The pandemic forced me to (finally) prioritize myself over the program and protect my health by extending my commitment to feminist, collaborative models of WPA work (Ratcliffe and Rickly) and contesting the notion of the hyper-abled WPA (Yergeau) by disabling WPA work (Vidali). I did so by distributing labor among various stakeholders in the composition program in ways that are equitable, interdependent, and diffuse—while also extending the work of the program—through Peer Teaching Mentors and teaching circles. Further, the conditions of the pandemic, and in particular the isolation felt by new TAs, created a felt need in the department for additional TA support.

While Peer Teaching Mentors wouldn’t be introduced until the 2021-2022 academic year, my department chair and I implemented an emergency version of teaching circles during the summer and fall of 2020. As Margaret J. Marshall writes, we hoped the circles would give TAs “a sense of community [and] a shared understanding of pedagogical goals” (414) at a time when TAs were isolated from each other and living all over the world. Beyond altruistic mentorship, we had another, pragmatic motivation. In May 2020, our provost “swept” all departments’ carry-forward money, claiming those funds were needed to avoid financial crisis. Pre-pandemic, my department used carry-forward money to pay substitutes if a TA needed medical or family leave. As my chair and I planned for Fall 2020, that money was not available when we feared we would need it most. What if half or more of our instructors were sickened by COVID? What if multiple instructors died of, or lost family members to, COVID? These questions were especially pressing because of the uncertainty surrounding the resumption of on-campus instruction, which throughout the summer was pushed back further and further into fall semester. Finally in mid-September, the provost announced all courses would remain online for the rest of the semester, with instructors choosing their spring classes’ modality.

In addition to the very real fears I had for instructors’ health and safety, I also had to ask a pragmatic question: Who would cover all of our classes in the event of mass illness or death, especially since there was no way to

pay substitutes? The best solution my chair and I devised was a bare-bones version of teaching circles for FYC instructors. We asked groups to Zoom with each other approximately once a month, discuss how they and their students were doing, and cover each other's classes if needed by meeting virtually and grading their work. Each group had at least one experienced instructor of first-year writing, and we asked that person to schedule the initial group meeting; the group collaboratively scheduled its meetings thereafter. This wasn't formal peer mentorship, as there were no designated mentors, and no one was trained or paid to mentor; it was a stop-gap measure to provide coverage and give instructors, especially new TAs, a ready-made group that shared the challenges of that very difficult year.

By midterm of Spring 2021, things felt more hopeful; vaccines were available, upper admin started returning funds, and the department had not seen mass illness. While we suffered a devastating loss when our chair's assistant was killed in a car accident, no faculty, staff, or graduate students died of the virus—an outcome that felt miraculous. As mass vaccination efforts began, I felt as if I could finally start to plan for the future.

A major part of that plan was the formal development of Peer Teaching Mentors and teaching circles. While I was apprehensive about the additional labor of creating a new program, I knew I could not continue as I was, and neither could the gWPAs. That certainty convinced me the benefits to the long-term health of myself, the gWPAs, and the TAs outweighed the risks of additional, short-term labor. The emotional labor the TAs needed had intensified; across the board, they were struggling with feelings of isolation and disconnection, and I began seeing issues among TAs I had never encountered. They needed help—more help than the gWPAs and I could provide. We were burned out, and I was dealing with additional challenges. My increased time online caused more pain and symptoms in my disabled arm, and I knew I could lose additional functionality if I continued to work at that pace. Further, as someone with chronic, low-level depression, I knew I had to take better care of myself to avoid sliding into the darkness.

Peer Teaching Mentors relieved some of those burdens and made the work of administering the writing program more diffuse. I hired five PhD students in comp-rhet and literature to work as PTMs for the 2021-2022 academic year, extending the Composition Office's mentorship by matching new TAs with a caring, knowledgeable peer they could turn to, without the anxieties they may feel about reaching out to the gWPAs and me. A WPA's supervisory function can potentially lead new TAs "to be less than frank with you" (Reid 254), as they may understandably worry about appearing competent in front of the person who can recommend that their

TAship not be renewed. Similarly, while gWPAs may be TAs' peers in the graduate program, they work closely with the WPA and may be perceived to have a supervisory function, even if they do not.

The PTMs' positionality and role enable them to sidestep these concerns. Peer Teaching Mentors are truly peers, in that they do not have teaching responsibilities for the TA training course or practicum like the gWPAs. What PTMs learn in teaching circles is confidential, unless they learn of issues that cause harm to students, other TAs, or the TA themselves. This firm boundary gives new TAs peace of mind that—with exceptions they fully understand—what happens in the circle stays in the circle. Further, the mentors are able to avoid some, though not all, of the tricky issues that can come with the in-between positionality of gWPAs. While PTMs bring generalized concerns of their circles to me, individual TAs are never identified except in the rare cases identified above.

There have been multiple benefits to distributing the responsibilities of WPA work more broadly. Thanks to peer mentorship, new and returning TAs are receiving more support than ever. In addition to meeting with their PTM during peer teaching circles, new TAs can contact them individually. Second-year TAs are observed by a PTM, who consults with them before and after the observation to discuss the TA's questions and goals. During Fall 2022, the PTMs began offering workshops on topics of interest, such as contract grading and discussion leading strategies, to all composition instructors. By sharing in multiple responsibilities that formerly only belonged to the gWPAs and me, the peer teaching mentors earn additional money, further develop and demonstrate their pedagogical expertise, and gain experience in writing program administration. Multiple PTMs have said this work has enhanced their pedagogy; they have grown into better, more reflective teachers as they have re-examined their own entrenched teaching practices and assumptions and have gained WPA experience that is beneficial in the competitive academic job market. Finally, this program has assisted me in making concrete the invisible labor of mentoring TAs, which can be challenging to document and justify.

The Peer Teaching Mentors have also played an important role in my efforts to protect my health, as well as that of the gWPAs, and disable WPA work by making it more interdependent, sustainable, and accessible for not only myself, but also colleagues who will follow in these roles. By sharing with the PTMs the emotional labor that comes with mentorship, the gWPAs and I no longer bear that increasingly onerous burden alone. There are still many challenges that must be addressed by me as the WPA; due to their nature, it would not be ethical or advisable for TAs' peers to intervene. However, sharing the mentorship typically needed by new TAs

has given me the time and resources to focus on the more difficult cases, without sacrificing my physical or mental health. I could not have accepted Miami's WPA position without knowing I had two gWPAs with whom I could collaborate and rely; as a disabled person, I knew that I could not do this job without that interdependence. As the pandemic intensified the demands of the role, it quickly became clear to me I could not remain in the position without sharing the labor in the ways disability studies urges. The PTM program has further disabled WPA work in ways that benefit all stakeholders—not only myself, but also the gWPAs, the PTMs, and the TAs—by developing an interdependent model of labor and enriching the learning that comes with WPA work.

The program is not perfect, and challenges remain. While my department's chair and director of graduate students are supportive, other colleagues question the program's importance and undermine its value to their students, who are pursuing degrees in composition and rhetoric, creative writing, and literature (for more on these tensions, see Beam and Rideout in this volume). One colleague told me their students are "here to write and think deeply, not teach," and unsurprisingly it is students in their area who are least likely to engage with their peer teaching mentors and circles. As someone who spent the first 12 years of my career on a regional campus, I am also deeply aware that this program requires funding not everyone has; I could create the program because I had a steady revenue stream from sales of our custom textbook.

However, I also see exciting possibilities on the horizon. This fall, our required TA training course will move from a two-week, pre-semester sprint to a semester-long course. While this change was demanded by upper administration and has had significant challenges and frustrations, it has given me the opportunity to reimagine TA training. As part of this reimagining, the Peer Teaching Mentors will be integrated into the course in ways they couldn't before, potentially enabling them to build deeper, more meaningful relationships with their peers. The PTMs and I are still designing what this integration will look like, as we want to be careful with their positionality; in other words, we don't want to lose the "peer" in Peer Teaching Mentors. However, we are confident that with careful planning and consideration, we can embrace these new possibilities in ways that allow for continued growth.

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