

October 2020

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Recommended Citation

Hamilton, Erica R.; Van Duinen, Deborah Vriend; and Rumohr, Gretchen (2020) "Inquiry and Counter-Witnessing in COVID-19," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 53: Iss. 1, Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol53/iss1/13>

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Inquiry and Counter-Witnessing in COVID-19

by Erica R. Hamilton, Deborah Vriend Van Duinen, and Gretchen Rumohr



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At its heart, inquiry involves tapping into curiosity and exploring an open-ended question or problem (Dewey, 1902; 1932). Rather than being told *about* a topic or issue, inquiry foregrounds the process of learning. It hinges on taking an open stance towards what we already think and know, challenging us to be open to learning something new or different (Johnston, 2004). Inquiry requires pursuing and being willing to enter unknown spaces that aren't predetermined or linear, and it serves as a powerful invitation to grow as we analyze, synthesize, and evaluate new and developing knowledge. It's also about vulnerability and counter-witnessing (Dutro, 2011) when we share our stories and lived experiences.

By way of introduction, we are former secondary English teachers and currently work as college and university faculty. We've been friends and colleagues for more than ten years and have collaborated on research, engaged in ongoing professional learning, and walked with one another through personal and professional milestones.

In Spring 2020, when COVID-19 disrupted how we worked and lived, we reflected together regarding professional and personal changes. Like others, juggling work and family demands presented unforeseen challenges and unexpected joys. Our time online increased exponentially. For two of us, we shifted our fully face-to-face undergraduate courses to remote instruction. One of us began leading a department virtually, seeking to support colleagues' personal and professional needs. And all of us contemplated a "new" normal that was anything but.

This article is our attempt to counter-witness—to share our own stories about COVID-19 changes. In counter-witnessing, we harness Dutro's (2011) idea of critical witnessing and, with it, the assertion that "to be effective witnesses for the testimonies of our students, we need, in turn, to allow them to be our witnesses—even when it is hard, even when it feels too risky" (p. 194), broadening this idea of counter-witnessing to those we encounter beyond the classroom.

But counter-witnessing is more than just sharing our stories. Throughout our experiences, we've tried (and

continue to try) to maintain an inquiry stance toward COVID-19 changes and our experiences. We share our stories here because we want to remember and reflect on what we've experienced. We don't intend to simplify, romanticize, or vilify our experiences. Rather, we seek to name some of our assumptions, emotions, and knowledge as teachers, colleagues, and parents in COVID-19.

COVID-19 Shifts

Deb: Teaching Identity

During those crazy weeks of March when schools and universities announced their decisions to go to remote learning, I remember feeling panicked about the task of transferring the content of my courses online. *How were my preservice teachers going to conduct lessons in their clinical placements? How would I lead engaging course discussions if we weren't face to face? What could replace canceled guest speakers? How would I assess participation? How would I grade in general?*

While world news headlines seemed to update by the hour, focusing on the concrete logistics of remote teaching felt like something I could, at least, *try* to control. As it turned out, some of my course activities and assignments were fairly easy to transfer to our new online context. Adjusting others required more creativity, innovation and a steep learning curve in using Zoom, Loom, and Flipgrid. My students and I fumbled our way to the end of the semester with a smattering of technical issues and some awkward online interactions.

Because of these and other changes to our professional and personal lives during this time of COVID-19, we decided to explore texts together that spoke into and about the changes we were experiencing. We started with Brené Brown's (2020) *Unlocking Us* podcast episode, "the FFT" and from there shared many articles and blog posts via texts and emails. These texts helped to give language for what I found myself experiencing as a professor, especially permission to lament what I missed, and a space to reflect and reframe.

The texts helped me realize that in focusing on the changes in course logistics and content, on things that I could potentially "control," I initially overlooked some

deeper shifts in my teaching identity. I wasn't able to articulate this until I began unpacking and articulating my varying, and often unpredictable, emotions and reactions. Like others, I missed being able to read my students' nonverbal communication during face-to-face classes: the ways they sat, what they brought with them, their facial expressions as I led them through a new idea or concept. I missed being able to gauge the energy level of a class and respond to in-the-moment learning realizations. I didn't realize how often I informally assessed students' misconceptions, prior knowledge, and developing questions during face-to-face interactions. I missed talking with students before and after class and having random touchpoints with them on walks across campus and in my office building. And I was not only exhausted after my Zoom classes, but also frustrated with my own online learning curve.

I also realized that it wasn't just about interacting with students. My teaching identity included my professional conversations with other faculty members. I missed interacting with my colleagues, especially the hallway conversations and stopping by offices to ask a question or clarify a department matter. No longer could we discuss their weekends or families and capitalize on the small moments that energized and strengthened our sense of collegiality and community.

Gretchen: Vulnerability with Colleagues

As an administrator, I was shielded from many of the COVID-19 teaching disruptions. While I was not forced to move a curricula online, I still felt immobilized by fear, a sudden and significant change in routine, and an inability to fall back on the old coping mechanism standbys (e.g., the gym, a thrift store, coffee with a friend). However, as time wore on, it became apparent that perhaps "moving forward" didn't necessarily mean "administration" in the traditional sense of writing annual reports or allocating departmental funds (though still essential). For me, "moving forward" meant stepping back, listening, and being open to learning – and sharing – in new ways.

Stepping back meant asking how I could actually help others during this time. I recognized that sharing

resources was one way to support my colleagues, yet there were so many unknowns. Nevertheless, as Brown (2015) describes in *Rising Strong*, the disruptions of the pandemic presented an opportunity to be vulnerable—to “[have] the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome” (p. 4). Showing up meant not only sharing teaching resources, but also considering what valuing others looked like from a faculty point of view. In academia, where fortitude translates into high-stakes evaluations and publish-or-perish, I wanted faculty members to boldly identify and articulate their needs—and tell me more (Corrigan, 2018).

A few weeks before COVID-19 changed academia, I met with a colleague who desired curricular guidance. I offered to share samples of textbooks and research-based assignments and then detailed my own experience with a course-embedded book workshop project. The conversation really began, however, when I went off-script and asked, “So...how are things going?” I learned that it hadn’t been a good semester for my colleague on a personal level: small children’s demands were endlessly tiring; a spouse was supportive but also busy; there had been a bipolar episode and a hospitalization, and they weren’t out of the woods yet.

In our conversation, we moved from the professional to the personal: my colleague “telling me more” by sharing struggles with mental wellness, and me validating these struggles and then sharing that I had spent the previous 18 months battling depression and experiencing productivity fallout when my meds worked too well to keep me from caring enough. This conversation allowed me more informed email check-ins with this colleague during the Stay Home, Stay Safe order as well as a commiserating of sorts. After all, we seemed to be processing, struggling, and succeeding in similar ways. In our case, I was grateful for this gift of reciprocity, the assurance that we were not alone.

Other interactions with colleagues did not involve putting on false airs: the inertia, the fears, and the frustrations made an appearance. Conversations such as the one described above were unapologetically frank. On the virtual faculty forum, I was quick to share articles

that normalized the disruptions academics felt due to COVID-19. And, I participated in such identification and articulation myself, thankful that we were still in dialogue—providing support and resources with each other—which encouraged an awareness that grieving, establishing new routines, and taking risks would help me see the world in new ways and embolden me to be innovative and brave (Ahmad, 2020).

Erica: Productivity

I’ve always considered myself a productive person and, if I’m honest, I take great pride in the amount of work I get done. In less-than-healthy ways, though, I’ve used productivity to mark and assign my own value and worth. The more I get done in a day or a week, the better. As a general rule, no matter how much I have going on, I figure out ways to meet my commitments and get everything done.

However, throughout the COVID-19 spring months, I struggled to maintain enough focus and energy to work on and complete tasks. When I first sat down to draft some content for this section, over the span of three hours I started and stopped more times than I can recall. I navigated and peripherally supervised a preschool Zoom call, dealt with a distraught child, responded to students’ emails, sat with a middle schooler to help them with homework, made lunch, dealt with an issue connected to that morning’s heavy rainfall, set up a device for child’s upcoming tele-health appointment, and double-checked a new assessment for an online class I was teaching. Reading this list now leaves me a bit breathless. And, yet, at the time I struggled to see how any of this was productive. By mid-March, much of my work felt mostly reactive, frenetic, and tiring. Gone were the days when I could complete a task and then start another.

However, inquisitiveness about my own and others’ productivity, particularly in the era of COVID-19, forced me to re-examine, re-think, and wrestle—not only with time management but also with ideas and internal messages I repeated to myself. Pre-pandemic, for example, I would have read an article in one sitting, but when we shared and later virtually discussed Minello’s (2020)

article about the maternal wall in higher education and issues female academics were managing in the midst of the pandemic, it took me three attempts to read the full article. I simply couldn't finish it in one sitting due to additional people, needs, and tasks clamoring for my attention. Minello's article also had me questioning my professional trajectory. As a newly-tenured female associate professor, I wondered how I could continue to meet job expectations and maintain the workload needed to justify future advancement while also shouldering additional family responsibilities and navigating new COVID-19 normals.

COVID-19 challenged my preconceived notions of productivity and left me feeling scattered and unable to direct my full attention to much of anything. Metaphorically, I felt like I was living a game of whack-a-mole and no matter how much I did or how hard I worked, there was always something more. At the same time, I found myself being more honest about how my self-perceived value and worth were so closely tied to how much I could get done.

Moving Forward: What We Want to Remember & Why

Months have passed since mid-March and we continue to remain unsure of what will happen in the future. We recognize that we will not be returning to "normal" life, teaching, or learning. Switching to remote teaching, online learning, and virtual administrative tasks continue to challenge and change us.

When we consider our teaching, we are reminded that teaching identity is ultimately found in a common humanity. Our own emotional and mental health are part of who we are as educators and what we bring to others. The course content we choose is and always has been in response to something. This presents opportunities to ask questions about our identities as educators. *How can we keep our humanity and our commitment to being responsive central to our work? What kinds of questions and issues are of most value to our current students? What processes should we foreground? How can we plan for and support students' learning?*

As we think about showing support for others, we are reminded of the importance of using the phrase, "tell me more" before making conclusions. When colleagues inquire how we are doing, perhaps we can be more honest and vulnerable about the messes in our houses as well as recognize and normalize the professional and personal inertia that surfaces during crises. We acknowledge the value of responding honestly when colleagues ask how we are doing; we can detail how many times we've unloaded the dishwasher or how stuck we feel when grading the last batch of projects, planning the next unit, or drafting an article for publication.

Our reflections on productivity remind us of its value among educators and how it often determines our perceived self-worth and esteem. Eurich (2017) notes, "the more stress we are under, the more unrealistic we tend to be about our abilities, characteristics, and behaviors" (p. 249). Even though COVID-19 changed many of our day-to-day realities, we recognize we didn't always do a very good job of adjusting expectations for ourselves. They were still too high and, in many instances, unrealistic. They also caused a good deal of stress. As a result, we are working to identify and name some of the internal messages we've long believed, such as *production is good* and *busy indicates value*. As a result, we wonder what "COVID-19 productivity" might teach us? What other messages and mantras will require revision as we move through and come out on the other side COVID-19?

Finally, we recognize that channeling the power of vulnerability means counter-witnessing. COVID-19 has taught us that we can listen and validate when others counter-witness, telling us that they weren't particularly focused on writing or grading after they broke up a fight over the last bowl of ice cream while attempting a faculty meeting on Zoom. We see power, and safety, in storytelling (Brown, 2017). We see value in counter-telling and validating. It is through these acts that we find, and model, courage and self-acceptance. In our teaching and administrative roles, we—along with other educators—can speak our truths and experiences bravely and hope that in so doing, others will follow suit. After all, when others "tell us more," we become

emboldened to make space for everyone's story. We also become empowered to reflect on others' needs, providing new avenues for professional and personal support.

It would be nice if we could say that COVID-19 made us more balanced, sane, healthy humans. But the truth is, like other educators, we were doing the best we could with the tools we had at the time. We don't yet know the answers to all the questions we're asking but what we do know is that COVID-19 challenged, and still challenges, us to stay curious as we counter-witness with and to one another.

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