

# Communities of Practice, Communities of Care: Building a Writing Program Community at the Height of COVID

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Issues of community building have long been part of WPA work and scholarship. When theorizing composition teachers as simultaneously experts, autonomous agents, and community members, Penrose frames community as “continuous interchange with others as colleague, mentor, [and] co-learner” (118). Such community concerns are paramount in Georgia Tech’s Writing and Communication Program (WCP), which houses the Marion L. Brittain Postdoctoral Fellowship; the fellowship uses a cohort-based model of professional development to support recent PhD graduates in developing their teaching skills and exploring career possibilities.<sup>1</sup> Community-building in the program faced major challenges during the height of COVID when instructors could not connect with students or colleagues in person. Like other writing programs at the time, we struggled to reconcile our professional ideals with unprecedented constraints. In response to the opportunity provided by this special issue to “explore how WPAs responded and continue to respond to shifts in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic,” (CFP) in what follows, I weave together strategies we used to build community with the results of a study in which our 2020 cohort of postdoctoral fellows reflected on their experiences integrating into our program.<sup>2</sup> I conclude by considering the ways WPAs might consider their programs as communities of care as well as communities of practice.

## COMMUNITY IN WRITING PROGRAMS

As reflected in Penrose’s article, issues of community in writing programs are generally framed as communities of practice. Wegner defines communities of practice as having a particular domain (e.g., teaching writing), community (e.g., engaging in “joint activities and discussions” about teaching writing), and practice (e.g., doing the work of teaching writing). Communities of practice in writing programs are often established through faculty development programming in that these initiatives seek to foster a consistent and coherent curricular and/or pedagogical practice (see Wardle and Scott). While communities of practice are central to many programs, they may be particularly important for programs such as mine that are comprised of contingent, non-tenure-track (NTT), and/or graduate student

instructors. In fact, the potential lack of community for contingent faculty is reflected in two of the five recommendations offered in the MLA Committee on Contingent Labor in the Profession's *Professional Employment Practices for Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Members* ("professional development and recognition" and "integration into the life of the department and the institution") (262-263). In response to this challenge, communities of practice may strengthen the professional identity of NTT writing instructors and help integrate them into the life of the program (Fitzpatrick et al.; Fedukovich and Hall).

While communities of practice are important to many aspects of writing program work, the concept, as defined by Wegner, may not be capacious enough to describe the importance of programmatic community in light of COVID. Communities of practice as an organizational concept emphasize collaborative professional learning, thereby setting aside, at least implicitly, the affective factors social scientists use to characterize communities writ large—factors such as "the feeling of belonging, "a sense of mattering," and a "shared emotional connection" (McMillan and Chavis 9). Yet these are precisely the elements that the pandemic—with its ongoing anxiety, isolation, and loss—made into daily concerns in writing programs and elsewhere. In my program, belonging, mattering, and emotionally connecting have been strong aspects of our cohort model. Conversely, the nature of the pandemic ensured that the postdocs in the 2020 cohort were not all in the same room until August 2021. At that moment, as they locked arms for a photo, it was clear that they had become close both in professional and affective senses despite their distance and isolation. Understanding how that community came together and the role the program's efforts—particularly its faculty development efforts—played may help us better understand the ways writing program community develops.

#### COMMUNITY-BUILDING IN THE FALL 2020 COHORT

To better understand the community the fall 2020 faculty developed, I invited the five faculty—three of whom work at my institution and two of whom have moved on to other positions—to share their reflections about their first semester. Using a brief IRB-approved survey,<sup>3</sup> I asked the faculty questions about their sense of community and the formal and informal ways that community was built. All five faculty members opted into the study; because two of the faculty are currently my direct reports, I kept the survey anonymous to avoid feelings of pressure to opt in. The responses to the survey shed light on the ways the faculty respondents forged a

community at the time as well as the role of the writing program in facilitating—or failing to facilitate—that community.

As conveyed in their responses, the five new faculty felt strongly connected to each other despite the distance among them, noting that their group was “very close” and “tight knit.” Their relationships displayed characteristics of both communities of practice (e.g., supporting one another in course design and pedagogical problem-solving) and more affective elements of communities writ large (e.g., becoming friends and offering emotional support related to both work and the pandemic). All respondents noted that the situation itself fostered connection. “COVID restrictions ironically brought our cohort together,” wrote one. Another wrote that “COVID restrictions created both physical distance and desperation for human contact.” A third emphasized the group’s supportive nature: “Because so many of us were teaching online for the first time, working remotely pushed us to get comfortable sharing successes and failures quickly.”

Tellingly, multiple respondents characterized the situation in relation to the academic job market. The postdoctoral faculty we hire tend to view the job market with exhaustion; the apparent further collapse of the job market in response to COVID led some of the respondents to describe their full-time employment in frank and sometimes ecstatic terms. “Searching for jobs in the previous two years was a demoralizing, frustrating process of being told by employers that [my PhD] had marked me as unhireable,” wrote one. “Imagine my elation once the fellowship liberated me, at least for a while, from that embarrassment.” “I felt a shared sense of going through something together,” wrote another, “navigating the pandemic while also having just been freed, so to speak, from the academic job market.” While the respondents felt strongly connected to each other, four of the five faculty expressed difficulties connecting with other colleagues outside of the cohort. The job market was at play here as well.<sup>4</sup> One respondent recalled the “ubiquitous bitterness” of other writing postdocs “poisoned with a near constant sense of dread” who had “lost an entire semester of professionalization.”<sup>5</sup>

All the respondents found the existing modes of building a community of practice helpful in promoting connections among themselves. These modes included a one-week online pre-semester orientation, a weekly pedagogy seminar throughout the fall, and service on program and department committees. These initiatives were adapted to remote work and supplemented with other efforts to build belonging, such as small group meetings, remote teaching observations, and optional, informal WPA “office hours.” Despite these initiatives, it was informal opportunities for connection that respondents identified as difficult or lacking in their fall 2020 experience.

One recalled that the cohort's remote happy hours "helped" but could not "recreate the casual movement between multiple ongoing conversations that is part of in-person socialization." Another noted that "the lack of spontaneous opportunities to meet probably hampered those connections" outside the cohort.

#### COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AS COMMUNITIES OF CARE

The survey responses paint a picture of a group of new postdoctoral instructors coming together as a community despite their physical separation. Their connections were facilitated, at least initially and in part, by the program that continually fostered a community of practice through the online orientation, the pedagogy seminar, and committee service. Penrose's framing of community as "continuous interchange with others as colleague, mentor, and co-learner" was further supported through mentoring groups and an instructor-only Slack channel. Though these structures fostered connections within the group, integrating the new instructors into the life of the department and institution was more difficult. While some of this difficulty can be attributed to pandemic isolation, the survey responses align with anecdotal accounts of previous cohorts, and the question of how to best foster connection with departmental and institutional colleagues remains open.

Seemingly as important as the modes of connection, respondents noted that their awareness of their shared situation—being defined by the pandemic, quickly adapting to a new job, and facing the difficult academic job market—was an important factor in bringing them together. These responses suggest our writing program is not just a community of practice but also a community of belonging, mattering, and shared emotional connection. While the practice of teaching writing is the core of this community, the pandemic made clear that the community of practice does not exist—or at least does not function—without the mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing of its members.

As seen in listserv discussions, social media posts, and this special issue, the pandemic has prompted WPAs to attend more heartily to issues of care. Fisher and Tronto define caring as "a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (40). As WPAs, we are responsible for maintaining, continuing, and repairing the writing program so that we can live (work, teach) as well as possible. Such work may seem like yet another burden in an already challenging time. And yet, one survey respondent suggests we already have the necessary tools at our disposal:

Amid a period of intense uncertainty in both our field and in the world, it was incredibly helpful to work in a program that was run so efficiently and with care for its faculty. It was a relief to work in a program that had very clear administrative structure, operating procedures, and development opportunities.

Put another way, one might characterize caring WPA work as, at least in part, good administration—and for those of us leading contingent faculty, administration that’s attentive to contingent faculty needs, including professional development and integration into the life of the department. The future promises additional crises that, like COVID, will strike at our wellbeing in ways we cannot predict. While I and the program I direct will necessarily need to adapt, I am reassured that I have tools available (clear policies, processes, and organization; consistent modes of faculty connection; a set of shared experiences and values; and an ethos of caring I try to model) for our community to approach these challenges with intelligence, creativity, and compassion.

In closing, I offer an illustration of how communities of care exist, often unseen, amid the day-to-day work of professional life. In October 2020, a postdoc in the program passed away unexpectedly. She was a real community builder, from her scholarship in the rhetoric of food to her partnerships across campus, to her engagement with community partners in her classes. Her death hit hard. Yet within a day, another instructor in our program organized a time for those interested to meet remotely, remember our colleague, and be together. Soon, I worked with two colleagues from the department—an associate professor and a lecturer—to build a little free pantry in our colleague’s memory. It currently sits in the writing program building to support students and others who face food insecurity. On top of that, the five new faculty emailed me to suggest that we not meet for that week’s pedagogy seminar—not for them, but for me. “You knew [our colleague] well and are particularly impacted by her passing,” they wrote. “We want to give you a chance to make more time for self-care, too” (Lewis). The gesture was small, meaningful, and absolutely needed. I hope to create the conditions for this kind of community, this kind of care, to be evident in everything our program does—not just on the bad days, but every day.

## NOTES

1. Since January 2022, twenty-five Brittain Fellows have moved into full-time positions, with eleven of them moving into tenure-track positions.

2. Thanks to the 2020 cohort for supporting this article: Danielle Gilman, Jill Fennell, Eric Lewis, Shane Snyder, and Anu Thapa. Thanks to Melissa Ianetta for her constructive feedback and editing.

3. Georgia Tech IRB protocol H23139.

4. Alternately, one respondent noted how the programmatic committee structure allowed for quick connection into the programmatic community.

5. In response to the pandemic, the program extended the terms of third-year instructors by a year in 2020 and again in 2021; in 2022, the program returned to the standard three-year term with an option to apply for an additional year. Recognizing the need for additional support, the program has bolstered career development efforts through an academic job search seminar and an optional alternative and non-academic careers seminar.

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## APPENDIX: SURVEY

In this survey, please reflect on your experience during your first semester [in the program], during which you worked remotely due to Covid (August–December 2020). This study is particularly interested in the ways you felt (or didn't feel) connected with each other and with the writing program community.

1. How would you characterize your cohort community during that first semester?
2. How would you describe the ways that working remotely affected your connection to your cohort?
3. How would you describe the ways that working remotely affected your connection to the broader writing program community?
4. What formal ways—orientation, digital pedagogy seminar, committee service, etc.—proved helpful in strengthening your sense of belonging to a community?
5. What informal or unofficial ways—perhaps calls, emails, or meetings among yourselves or with other colleagues—proved helpful in strengthening your sense of belonging to a community?
6. (OPTIONAL) What other thoughts do you have that would be useful for understanding your sense of belonging to a community during Fall 2020?

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