

Editor’s Introduction: A Fantastic Voyage: Shifting to Distance Learning, Empathetic Listening, & Resilience in a Time of Change

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Whether we admit it or not, change is inevitable. This is even more apparent within the always-changing context of education (Lloyd, 2014). Teachers, though, are usually left floundering somewhere in the middle between acceptance and anxiety. Even before a global pandemic arrived on our doorsteps, the turn of the millennium ushered in increasing globalization, an array of new technologies, and a variety of socio-political changes. These changes, perhaps even more profound than the pandemic itself, have thrust teachers into a space within which they must learn to evolve quickly and successfully. However, when a foundational change is hurried, this can give us a feeling that is quite like watching a child try to push the square puzzle piece into the triangle-shaped opening. Frustration.

Distance learning did not just request that we learn new technologies and skills (and how to assist students in their use)—it forced us to. This issue shines particularly bright on writing instructors as we have already been fighting a decade-long, uphill battle against budgetary constraints that have led to doubled class sizes and increased counts of underprepared students (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2011).

Mathematically, then, this means there are simply fewer job openings in the field as less work is available. We must, quite simply, evolve or risk allowing ourselves to go extinct. Moreover, the sum of all these changes and insecurities has overwhelmed us—especially those of us who learned and began our careers during the more stable days of education (Lloyd, 2014).

But how can we help one another acclimate to change? First, we need to take as human of an approach as possible. It is human nature to resist and question change. Especially when, as Lloyd (2014) explained, the skills that served us well in the past suddenly do

not work in a new context, causing us to have a “crisis in self-esteem” (p. 2). Personally, I have seen many peers resist the change to distance learning, experience psychological and even physical ailments related to the stress of the change, and even leave the profession due to the change.

Now, more than ever, instructors of all levels can learn from and support one another across the invisible-but-present boundaries of secondary and postsecondary education regarding virtual learning innovation. The main way we can help one another is in forums like *The Wisconsin English Journal*. The more we can keep one another informed about upcoming changes and their impact, provide proactive advice on preparation, and give ongoing support to one another, I believe we will avoid going extinct. We must be innovators in searching for and building knowledge on the change, which will only raise our confidence in embracing it.

Rather than just discussing the changes distance learning has placed on us, hold both formal and informal meetings with your peers where you can share experiences with the change (both positive and negative). Make sure to allow time to ask questions and create an agenda to research and look further into trouble areas. Ask leaders to provide you with a method of reaching out for assistance when you or a peer is struggling.

In fact, leaders may want to consider joining a leadership community and/or adopting one of many interpersonal emotional management strategies. During intense times of change, leaders might consider meetings with an emphasis on:

1. *Cognitive Change*: Reframing the perspective on change and its impact whenever possible.
2. *Attentional Deployment*: Redirecting teachers away from harmful emotions about change and offering positive ones (e.g. using humor and positive assurance).
3. *Modulating the Emotional Response*: Mandating that negative emotions be set aside during discussions about change (Little, Gooty, & Williams, 2015).

It is clear to see that a driving point behind these strategies is working to communicate with empathy at all times. In my own course, *Empathetic Listening, Identity & Illness*, I define empathy as having the desire to understand a person, their concerns, needs, and abilities. Parrish (2015) found that without empathy, leaders cannot promote productivity and success during challenging times. This means, without empathetic communication, writing teachers will not be able to effectively share their feelings, struggles, and strengths in a way that allows them to reorient themselves or an entire team with the goal of moving forward in an empowered way.

Distance learning is change. Not all of us handle change well, but that does not make us bad teachers—it makes us human. By considering the above, we can navigate forward alongside change and across borders as we empathetically listen to and assist one another. Perhaps all of this would not be so hard if we always saw one another as people—and good people at that.

References

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