

Chapter 13

“Let’s Hope for the Best!”: Navigating Speedy Delivery and Cultivating Expressive Space in Pandemic–Era Tutoring

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author sets out to explore the best strategies for not only supporting peer tutoring during a pandemic, but also to better acknowledge the mental strain many students have experienced since COVID-19 emerged. Using a composition and rhetoric studies approach as well as psychological research, the author proposes that professionals in higher education need to actively find ways to incorporate “expressive space” for students to work through hurdles in their learning because students are now processing significant traumatic experiences and motivational challenges while pursuing their academic goals. Tutoring coordinators and educators are encouraged to give students opportunities to mindfully engage with internal and environmental obstacles in order to persist throughout their academic career and in the lives they lead after college.

INTRODUCTION: HITTING PAUSE IN AN UPSIDE DOWN WORLD

Mindful reflection became a critical need during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic for educators. Yet, many found little time to actually look at their virtual and hybrid learning environments with a focused and hopeful mindset. Most could only strive to survive each day while unimaginable change shattered their teaching routines and expectation; strategizing the best next steps to take as professionals was nearly impossible.

By the end of 2020, America had not only experienced a lockdown for half of the year due to the COVID-19; we also contended with major shifts in American culture and politics. The country watched the Black Lives Matter movement reignite due to further instances of police brutality, and mass protests emerged in order to address historic and systemic racism. Americans also withstood a contentious

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presidential election where the sitting president denied the final results and then incited a riot at the U.S. Capitol that day of the counting and certification of the Electoral College votes. As 2021 begins, most Americans are still plagued with the unfolding chaos of this global crisis, and many of them continue to face a destabilized world since the beginning of the pandemic due to increasing financial insecurity, growing social injustices, housing loss, depletion of resources, and major health risks. According to the CDC COVID Data Tracker, the United States lost 367,652 Americans to COVID-19 with nearly 21 million confirmed cases by the first two weeks of 2021 since the arrival of the virus during March 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Therefore, it should be no surprise that even the World Health Organization (WHO) has also created advisory material related to maintaining healthy lifestyles as well as mental health given the collective traumas that have occurred since COVID-19 surfaced on a global scale (World Health Organization). Cultivating hope in 2021 already seemed like “wishful thinking” when facing the most difficult parts of a pandemic year, let alone an academic one.

To be truthful, the idea of hope became less and less tangible for most people throughout most of 2020. Looking ahead for promising signs shifted to seeming more of a fool’s errand instead of something essential for daily living. Time felt less structured by space and outside routine, and yet, somehow, for many American educators, like myself, we wished for time to pause enough to consider how our lives had transformed, for the better and for the worse. From the outset of the pandemic in the United States, universities had to react with lightning speed. In March 2020, American colleges and universities asked their faculty and academic coordinators to suddenly flip on their computers and to use them as a teaching and learning platform. Few felt like they had the time to truly consider all the best possibilities to transform their academic support services and classrooms to be accessible solely in virtual spaces. With no clear direction and no precedent for best learning practices during a pandemic, it was all hands on deck for the flagship of American education.

As a learning coordinator in a Writing Studio of a Student Success Center, I too scrambled to develop the most ideal virtual platform for providing academic help via peer tutoring for students, given the restrictions that arose from COVID-19. As a College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) certified peer tutoring program, my colleagues and I are cognizant of the bounty of academic research on online tutoring programs as well as the many collaborative experts in our fields who were willing to help us rethink our services with the pandemic’s disruption to learning in mind. Even with this awareness, we also knew that there was little time to distill what was happening outside of higher education that was drastically altering how students approach learning before our peer tutoring program had to be functional as well as accessible to students. Months later, it was only when taking a step away from the swift reactions of providing speedy virtual service that I was able to take on a more reflective stance on how to build a more holistic approach to providing virtual peer tutoring services, thanks to a wide array of interdisciplinary theory and critique on how we learn best online in both optimal as well as challenging environments. Therefore, this chapter not only reviews what online learning in a peer tutoring program can look like before and during a pandemic, it is also the story of how our Student Success Center chose the virtual platforms we did for re-imagining academic support for students and peer tutors while realizing there was much more to still consider, learn, and most importantly, express. In truth, cultivating expressive virtual spaces within our peer tutoring program became the most vital collective need for our staff and ourselves during a historically traumatic year.

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