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University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Frandsen

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Making Sense of the Pandemic: Teaching Through Story

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By Gitte Frandsen

When COVID-19 disrupted our F2F classes this semester and we moved online, a Cultural Rhetorics framework helped me make sense of my online teaching and focus my efforts to maintain a classroom community. Though the second half of the semester created a stressful and difficult learning environment for the students, it also gave me an opportunity to examine what I value in teaching and to reflect on how I can create a better learning environment for my students.

A Cultural Rhetorics framework helped me to understand my classroom dynamics, and especially the dynamics between the students and myself once we moved online. Cultural Rhetorics highlights the notion that all cultures are constituted by rhetorical practices that help members make sense of their world and build community. Cultural Rhetorics studies how members make meaning in and through [relationships](#). It focuses on how material bodies interact with each other, and how our embodied experiences shape and are shaped by that relationality. Cultural Rhetorics studies cultures such as Native American cultures, workplace cultures, and crafting cultures; I would argue that a classroom is also a specific culture, albeit a temporary and perhaps more loosely knit one.

Though we had only just started developing relationships in the classroom when COVID-19 happened, I was struck by the relationships I developed with many students in spite of the distance. I had wanted to maintain a collaborative learning model online to continue learning with and from each other but realizing how many access issues COVID-19 caused for the students, I dropped the collaborative element to simplify the expectations. I remained in touch with everyone regularly though. Students expressed feeling isolated, lonely, and longing for the relationships in the classroom, but simultaneously they cultivated their relationships with me. They reached out about their circumstances and shared personal stories. They expressed extreme gratefulness for the fairly simple acts of kindness I provided by being understanding and flexible. I couldn't help but reflect that, ironically, though the virus forced us apart, it also made visible how interconnected we are. [Models](#) of the contagion particularly demonstrated how many people's lives we touch, so the models became a strange metaphor for the relationality between us.

These changing and meaningful relationships with my students happened while I was struggling with isolation from many other personal relationships, and while I had to adjust to new relationships with my family, as we were all home, working and being home-schooled. All of us were trying to negotiate our new life which was difficult. I, too, was sharing my struggles with my students. And somehow there was a silver lining in these positive relationships that found a

new way to grow.

Cultural Rhetorics also centers [storytelling](#), and the potential for stories to create meaning and build community. Because my students clearly yearned to tell stories about their experiences, I gave them an option to write a research project that centered their stories on how COVID-19 had affected their lives, workplaces, or communities. I had students who were working as RNAs at hospitals and nursing homes, or who worked in retail or at restaurants. I had students who suddenly became the breadwinners of their families; students who got ill with COVID-19, or who witnessed people die from COVID-19. I had students who were struggling with their school work because retaining learning was difficult in an online learning environment, and students whose teachers suddenly gave them way more homework. There were so many stories. It was clear they wanted to tell those stories in order to make sense of all the confusion and pain COVID-19 had caused. Although the goals for the research project shifted to center personal stories over “rigorous” research, the stories that emerged had strong voices and rhetorical awareness. The students thought carefully about the genres they picked, the modalities they used to tell their stories, the audiences they wanted to engage.

COVID-19 certainly was and will continue to be tough. It has amplified many of the [access](#) and accessibility issues students face under normal circumstances: technology, food and housing security, supporting families, childcare, and physical and mental health problems. Still, I value the lessons I learned from and with my students this semester which I will take with me into future classrooms. I think the relationality between students and the teacher, as well as among the students themselves, can be strengthened by sharing each other’s stories. We can listen to, validate, and learn from others’ and our own stories and use those stories to develop research questions, explore our positionality, and think rhetorically about how those stories can make meaning and maybe make a difference.

Gitte Frandsen is a 2nd year PhD student at UWM in Public Rhetorics and Community Engagement. Her teaching and research focus on linguistically, culturally, and socially sustaining pedagogies.