

IMAGE CREATION AS SELF-CARE

TEACHING WRITING COURSES DURING THE PANDEMIC

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FALL 2017

Peaches is preparing to teach her undergraduate Rhetoric and Composition (RC) courses for the first semester since she completed her English Master's degree in 2012. She starts her Educational Leadership doctorate program with a concentration in Expressive Arts the same semester, and already, the curriculum makes her nervous. It is only August, but her first Expressive Arts course calls for her to be vulnerable and expressive, concepts she feels uncomfortable using in the classroom. Meanwhile, the activities she designs for her RC students feel like they belong to someone else. *What do I value in teaching writing?* She thinks to herself. She is a fish out of water, flailing for a pedagogy beyond her reach and wondering if she should return to the familiar, yet restrictive water of teaching high school English.

A knock on her office door startles Peaches. She certainly is not expecting anyone and has a lot to do. Her body tenses as a woman with white curly hair dressed in an array of colorful clothes walks in, her long skirt swishing. Peaches smirks, knowing this woman is likely affiliated with Expressive Arts; she dresses like many of her class members that semester, full of vibrant textures that seem to proclaim, "Here I am!" Peaches is wearing her typical jeans and t-shirt in which she blends in well everywhere except that Expressive Arts class.

"Hi. Can I help you? The art department is across campus..." Peaches begins tersely. She cannot imagine ever being as busy as she is at this moment and hopes to send this colorful figure on her way.

"Oh, no! I'm here to see you!" The woman exclaims. "You can call me Beth. I was sent to chat with you a little bit about planning your RC courses. How is it going?" The woman pulls up a chair and smiles widely.

Peaches is accustomed to her department providing mentors, and she knows she needs any help she can get. She responds honestly to Beth, "I'm a little overwhelmed. I taught high school for five years after getting my Master's, and while I feel like I had some innovative ideas for engaging students with the arts (Hash, 2021), I'm just not sure how they will be received by college students. I want them to have a real educational *experience* in my course (Dewey, 1934/2005), not just passive learning."

Beth smiles, the lines in her face deepening with her full grin. "Oh, I remember that feeling well. You see, I'm an arts-based researcher and a writing teacher, and I put a great deal of pressure on myself to make my curriculum, as bell hooks (1994) would describe, pleasurable."

Peaches's eyes well up. She has not even started designing arts-based curriculum, and this woman sitting across from her seems to have it all figured out. She looks fulfilled by her career.

"I have an idea," Beth continues encouragingly. "Why don't I show you some of my art? It could help you think about your RC pedagogy. Metaphorical images can assist in orienting our ideas, but they can also, as Maxine Greene (1997) notes, enable "us to cross divides, to make connections between ourselves and others, and to look through other eyes" (p. 391).

“Oh wow, ok!” Peaches exclaims. She has not made her own art in years and is feeling stressed that she will soon have to for her Expressive Arts course.

Beth pulls her chair closer to Peaches and opens a small booklet. “This is a story, too. You may find the format odd. I wanted to find a way to blend the factual and imaginative worlds (Romano, 2000).” she explains. “A few years into teaching RC courses, as virus forced the university to move all courses online. I had no clear vision for how my arts-based curriculum could work online, and I really started doubting myself.”

Peaches’s eyes widen. “I can’t imagine ever doing that,” she states, “It’s hard enough just planning for this semester when everything is normal!”

“Well,” Beth replies with a gleam in her eyes, “You might be surprised what you’re capable of.” She begins to read:

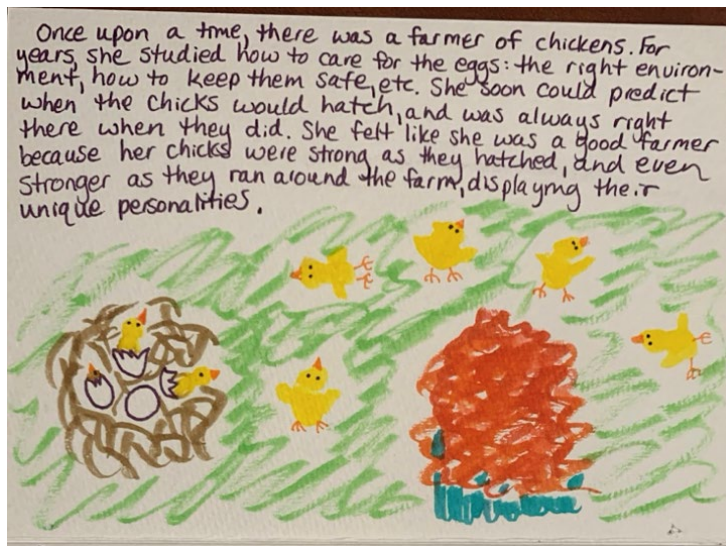


Image 1 Caption: Once upon a time, there was a farmer of chickens. For years, she studied how to care for the eggs: the right environment, how to keep them safe, etc. She soon could predict when the chicks would hatch and was always right there when they did. She felt like she was a good farmer because her chicks were strong as they hatched, and even stronger as they ran around the farm, displaying their unique personalities.

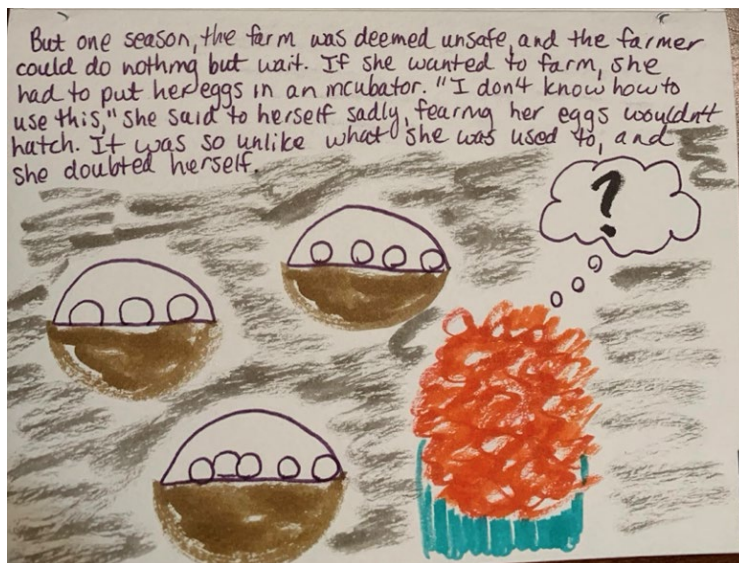


Image 2 Caption: But one season, the farm was deemed unsafe, and the farmer could do nothing but wait. If she wanted to farm, she had to put her eggs in an incubator. “I don’t know how to use this,” she said to herself sadly, fearing her eggs wouldn’t hatch. It was so unlike what she was used to, and she doubted herself.

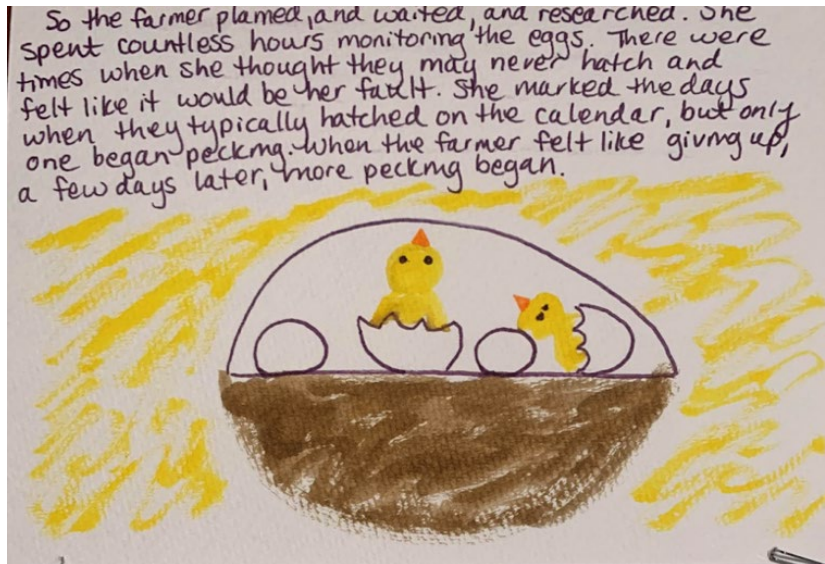


Image 3 Caption: So, the farmer planned, and waited, and researched. She spent countless hours monitoring the eggs. There were times when she thought they may never hatch and felt like it would be her fault. She marked the days when they typically hatched on the calendar, but only one began pecking. When the farmer felt like giving up, a few days later, more pecking began.

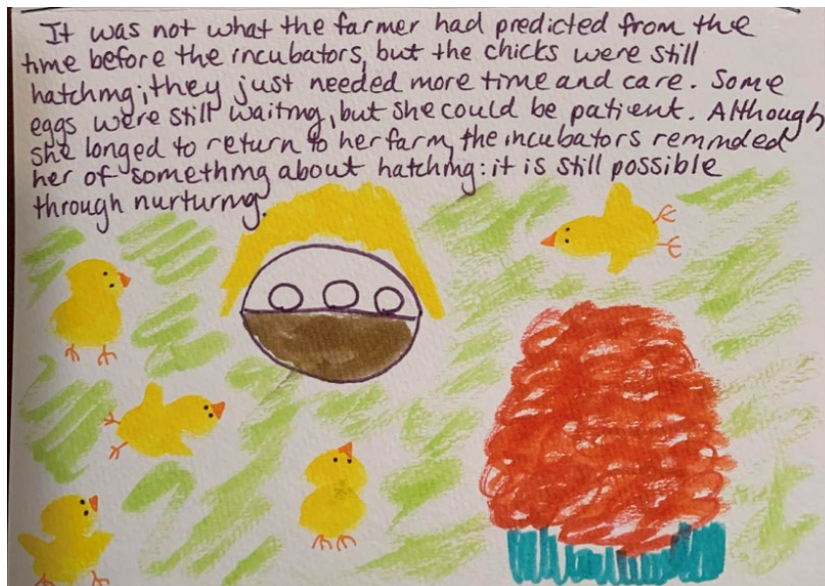


Image 4 Caption: It was not what the farmer had predicted from the time before the incubators, but the chicks were still hatching; they just needed more time and care. Some eggs were still waiting, but she could be patient. Although she longed to return to her farm, the incubators reminded her of something about hatching: it is still possible through nurturing.

“What did you think?” Beth asks.

“I love the hair you gave her!” Peaches says with a laugh, touching her own red curls.

“Me too,” Beth continues, mine used to be just like that. “Did you notice anything else?”

“I thought it was an interesting metaphor about teaching during a nontraditional time. It seems like the images you created represent this new relationship with yourself and your surroundings” (Helmets & Hill, 2004). You could still find confidence in your teaching once you adapted to the new environment,” Peaches explains.

Beth murmurs in agreement, but Peaches continues, “But why did you make it about chickens? You were this important college instructor. Weren’t you afraid it would take away from your ethos?”



“Well,” Beth replies, “I ask my students to take creative risks (Romano, 2013), which means I have to be willing to do so as well. But also, I wanted people who didn’t have the same experiences as me to understand. Composing metaphors can help me as the writer see the world differently and prompt me to “discover new relationships and how they might be articulated” (Berthoff, 1981, p. 7), but it can also help readers identify with my experiences even if they don’t have the same ones.”

“Yeah,” agrees Peaches. “That makes sense. I obviously haven’t taught online, but seeing the change from green outside to the gray inside with the incubators, I can tell what a hard transition it was. Everything looks stagnant and lifeless.”

“Very true,” Beth says.

Looking at the pictures, Peaches gets more excited. “The images really help tell the story. I can see nuances in them that the words don’t convey. The chickens are all over the place in the beginning, and you’re just observing and content with it. Then, the question mark before they’ve hatched in the incubator makes a contrast of feelings too. But then you put the yellow light around the incubator in the last two pictures, like nurturing could create the warmth needed for hatching.”

“I love hearing what you as an audience member are getting from the story!” Beth exclaims. “Meanings occur when we create them but also can change when we think about them” (Berthoff, 1981).

“The moral is really encouraging too,” Peaches adds. “I always had my high schoolers identify morals and themes. I like the whole ‘Situations may look different, but creative problem-solving can still get results.’”

“Oh yes,” Beth replies, “Kind of like moving from teaching high school to higher education...”

Peaches laughs for the first time in days. “Okay, I get it. You’re pretty good at mentoring.”

“Why, thank you!” Beth says with a smile, picking the booklet up to put in her bag.

“But wait,” Peaches says abruptly, “This isn’t just an inspirational story.”

Beth looks confused. “It isn’t?”

“Well, no,” Peaches continues. “Why don’t the readers ever see the teacher’s face? Why did you hide her?”

Beth is quiet for a minute. “I suppose I wanted it to look like she was observing the chickens.”

“But,” Peaches continues, “I would have been able to connect with her more if I’d seen her face. In the third image, you eliminate her entirely to get a closer view of the chickens. What about her?”

Beth looks down at her art. She created it long ago, but the images bring back feelings she tried to repress. Feelings of isolation, powerlessness, and exhaustion flood her body like jumping into icy waters as Peaches looks at her imploringly.

“Who cared for her? Who was helping her hatch?” Peaches asks softly.

Beth’s eyes begin to water. “I guess,” she says slowly, “She cared for herself. She made this art to help process it all and to remind her that it all came out ok.”

“I still think she deserved the same care she wanted to give her students,” Peaches states.

“You’re a very insightful person,” Beth says, beginning to compose herself.

“Thank you,” Peaches replies. “You know, this has given me a lot to think about. I want to do so much for my students, and I think I will, but maybe I need to stop being so hard on myself, too. I haven’t even started on my Expressive Arts project because I’ve been designing this RC



curriculum. I also have not been focusing on things in my life outside of my job and school like I should.”

“Oh, what an excellent idea. To be honest, caring for myself is something I still struggle with,” Beth admits.

“Are our offices nearby? Maybe we can make some art together?” Peaches asks.

“Actually,” Beth says apologetically, “You won’t be seeing me around here. I’ve worked in this department for years, but it’s time for new adventures. You will see me again though, of that I am certain.”

Peaches looks up with disappointment in her eyes, meeting Beth’s. It’s so sad to meet someone you connect with and then then have them leave, Peaches thinks. It’s also unusual to run into someone in my same department with the same shade of dark green eyes and the same springing curls.

“I’m sorry, dear, but it’s time for me to go,” Beth states, her smile widening, “But I’m going to think about what you said often, and I hope you’ll do the same for me.”

“Of course!” Peaches exclaims, “Thank you!”

The two women stand and hug, Peaches noting for the first time how close in height Beth is to her own five feet and eight inches.

Beth makes her way out of the building. As she opens her purse for her keys, she finds the keycard she used to get in. Her picture is smudged almost beyond recognition, an old picture she was too lazy to update, back when she had red hair and fewer lines on her face. The keycard still works after all this time. She lifts it to toss in the trash thinking that this is the last time she will use it. She pauses to look at the name on her card: *Peaches Elizabeth Hash*. Her younger self’s words from earlier echo in her mind: “Who cared for her? Who was helping her hatch?” Maybe Beth should hang onto the card. One never knows when they might need reminding to care for themselves.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

I composed this piece as a way to process my experiences of teaching during the pandemic. I have used art as a way of knowing both in personal practice and in my classrooms for years (Allen, 1995) but never to deal with an experience that was so challenging for me. Originally, I created the visual metaphor of the chicken farmer, which was an expressive arts exercise; I was drawn to art-making’s therapeutic and empowering qualities, providing the power to create and transform our experiences through constructive inner vision (Shore, 2009). After I finished making it, I felt that my imagination was, as McNiff (2015) stated, put “into action” (p. 1). I took my experience and changed it into something new, the metaphor, to reach a wider audience. My metaphor extended past my original personal intentions for practice, and I saw that the art called my attention to aspects of my experience I might not have noticed otherwise (Eisner, 2008). After all, as Pearson and Wilson (2009) wrote, “Feelings are often experienced as if stored or held in layers. There is a distinction between the original or primary emotion and the overlaying or secondary emotions” (p. 137). My art was not just about teaching my students; it was about my internal struggle as an educator as well.

I then decided to expand on my piece with the *currere* inspired frame story of two versions of myself: The former graduate student before the pandemic who was nervous about teaching and my imagined future self as a retiree in my department. This allowed me to analyze my feelings,



which became a source of information. In the classroom, feelings can help students “climb out of survival mode” (Souers, 2016, p. 31), leading to empowerment, but as an educator, I have been resistant to express my own feelings, especially during the pandemic. I realized, though, that my feelings were a form of information and once I expressed them, I could consider what they were trying to teach me and how I could transfer the information into the classroom (Brackett, 2019). My written *currere* serves as an internal dialogue of analysis (Leavy, 2018). As two versions of myself spoke to each other, I saw that my experiences were not just a linear story of caring for my students but a complex experience of how I lacked support myself but did not understand how to provide self-care. This is especially clear when the younger version of me realizes that the artwork never depicts the farmer’s face and that she is even nonexistent in one frame. Without the visual image evoking the emotional response, I am unsure if I would have come to that insight (Leavy, 2015).

Ultimately, depicting my lived experience through *currere* allowed me to “write back” (Elbow, 2003, p. vii) against the linear narrative that I was a teacher whose students struggled but found success during the pandemic. Personally, I was struggling and could have used a “Beth” for guidance and encouragement. I could have also used a “Peaches” to encourage a deeper look at my artistic expression (my personal experience). Brackett (2019) stated that “where there is an emotionally skilled teacher present, students disrupt less, focus more, and perform better academically” (p. 20); thus, an emotionally skilled teacher better supports students in navigating their own emotions. By working through the emotions I experienced during my most difficult time teaching, I hope to offer my students artistic opportunities to express their emotions. Additionally, Micciche (2007) noted that enacting emotion through creative practices can sharpen students’ composition skills. Through future uses of metaphor, visual images, and *currere* writing, I hope to strengthen the ways I support student learning.

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