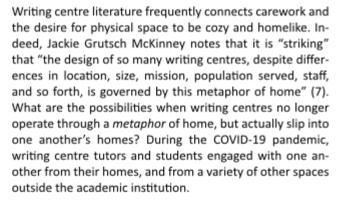WLN

# Pandemic Luxuries: Writing Centre Care in a Precarious World

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Writing centre literature frequently connects carework and the desire for physical space to be cozy and homelike. Indeed, Jackie Grutsch McKinney notes that it is "striking" that "the design of so many writing centres, despite differences in location, size, mission, population served, staff, and so forth, is governed by this metaphor of home" (7). What are the possibilities when writing centres no longer operate through a *metaphor* of home, but actually slip into one another's homes? During the COVID-19 pandemic, writing centre tutors and students engaged with one another from their homes, and from a variety of other spaces outside the academic institution.

Writing centre collaboration has followed many trajectories of thought about complex relationships between capitalist logics of market-exchange, luxury, carework, and concepts of home and writing centres. We were struck by the way writing centres have evaded, albeit imperfectly, market-exchange logic in the neoliberal university precisely by being situated as non-formal spaces of care. This positionality provides us with "the luxury to care" (Pistone), but it simultaneously results in writing centres being un(der)valued. Positioning writing centres as home spaces resonates here too, since homes, although necessities, have also been commodified as "investment opportunities." The bigger picture discussions of capitalism, market-exchange, care-as-commodity, and home-as-commodity are beyond our current scope. However, we wish to recognize the complex ways writing centres are subject to and also subvert broader academic and socio-cultural expectations.

**Note on the authors' photos:** These photos have a limited colour palette and reduced file size to reduce their carbon impact. Recognizing that collective action and systemic change are necessary to address the present climate crisis, we encourage others to consider using less carbon intensive images for websites and other media—although not all will have such cool visual effects!"

We focus on the opportunities that the virtual turn in response to the COVID-19 pandemic created to slip out of the institution and into new relationships marked by more radical forms of care. Hiʻilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese define radical care as a "set of vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds," as a "feeling with, rather than feeling for, others," and as an "affective connective tissue between an inner self and an outer world" (1-2). We apply these understandings of radical care to our experiences with writing centre work.

## COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Autoethnography is sometimes described as "insider ethnography," or studies conducted by researchers who are already part of the community they write about. Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis' conception of evocative autoethnography extends this understanding by describing it as research that offers a "critical response to disquieting concerns about silent authorship, the need for researcher reflexivity, or as a humanizing, moral, aesthetic, emotion-centered, political, and personal form of representation" (47). We add "collaborative" to autoethnography here because this paper includes first-person narratives alongside ideas and analysis that arose from our conversations and collective writing.

The autoethnographic approach allowed us to think *with* and *about* our experiences together (Phillips et al.), mirroring Hobart and Kneese's understanding of radical care as feeling with another. This process has pushed us to think and feel not only with one another as co-authors, but also with our own recalled writing centre experiences prior to, during, and beyond the virtual turn.

## WINDOW SWAPPING: SLIPPING THROUGH PORTALS OF RADICAL CARE

My name is Julia. I am a Writing Services Coordinator at a Student Learning Commons. I have been the direct supervisor for the three other co-authors. I hold a doctorate in Arts Education, and I am relatively early in my writing centre career. I am a white settler living on unceded Coast Salish lands, and I self-identify as a cis-femme mother and writer. I invite you to travel with me back to the day after our university announced that it was "canceling all on-campus classes and activities in an effort to stop the spread of COVID-19."

*We see each other's videos come up on screen and giggle, a little nervously. "Hi, thanks for being willing to meet like this. The world is... strange right now." "Yeah, I am really glad we were still able to connect. Plus, it's cool being able to see your kitchen behind you. I like those cabinets."*

*"Thanks. My partner and I built this house. I've thought about going into interior design, but I am trying out this degree …"*

So began my first virtual consultation. I was struck by how an off-handed compliment provided a window into the student's life beyond the classroom. Of course, this potential for connection always exists in consultations. But, there was something specifically intimate about this moment, as I not only learned a fact about the student, but was simultaneously welcomed into her kitchen.

I did not yet know that my own kitchen island would soon become my virtual office, just as I was unaware of the many forms of slippage I would experience as my identities of mother and writing centre professional settled into the same time and space, often my kitchen. Kitchens are recognized as uniquely meaningful sites in the Indigenous research methodology known as *kitchen table conversations* or dialogues. In their kitchen table talk, artists Cathy Mattes (Michif) and Sherry Farrell Racette (Algonquin/Metis/Irish) explain that the kitchen table is "where some of the best learning occurs. When we gather [...] around food and tea, we relax into easy conversation, lending to a safe space for dialogue and knowledge sharing." Virtual consultations did not allow us to share food or tea, but they did let us slip out of the institution and into more easy conversations and connections.

Early in the pandemic, a friend and colleague shared the website window-swap.com, which allows you to "open a new window somewhere in the world." As we co-authors reflected on the virtual turn, we discussed it as window-swapping: the opportunity to travel without leaving home; to open windows not only into others' spaces, but also into the "intimate and banal details" (Davis as qtd. in Hobart and Kneese 1) of another's life. We offer our reflections as "evocative stories" (Bochner and Ellis). We have not erased or flattened the differences in our experiences and perspectives. Instead, we engage the messiness that is writing centre care.

## STRATEGIES FOR ENDURING PRECARIOUS WORLDS

My name is Mohsen. I am an immigrant to Canada from Iran. English is not my first language; I started learning English at twenty. I did my bachelor's and master's in English language teaching in Iran before coming to Canada in 2012 to do a second master's in Education. I am currently a PhD student in Education. I have been working as a Graduate Writing Facilitator for almost four years.

Being a nonnative speaker/writer of English, I feel more comfortable teaching in a virtual space. In a physical space where I am surrounded by other people, there is always the question of legiti-

macy. I'm not suggesting that others think that I am not a legitimate writing advisor; this is a feeling that I, as an EAL writer/speaker, have. Questioning my legitimacy arises more when I am surrounded by white native speakers as I am teaching something (academic writing in *English*) that belongs to white people. My race, skin colour, accent, and even nationality all play a role in how I am viewed by others (Canagarajah).

Similarly, students who are learning across language, cultural, and racial barriers feel their precarity in the institution as a daily experience. These students, too, might carry with them feelings of illegitimacy and inauthenticity (Kramsch). Students attending Canadian universities are expected to be highly proficient in English language skills and competent in academic writing. Thus, EAL students might feel illegitimate and precarious because of their (perceived lack of) language proficiency.

As a common sense survival strategy, instructors often send EAL students to visit us to "fix their writing." On campus, students are taken to an open writing consultation space where they may be surrounded by white, native English speakers. Being observed may make these already-precarious students hyper-aware that others "doubt the legitimacy of their admission," as with Alexandria Lockett's description of her resistance to visiting the writing centre. Although we try to provide support, the instructor and university's expectations do not allow us to enact radical care; we are expected to fix students' writing and therefore required to treat them like they are lacking. Rather than being a strategy for survival, a visit to the writing centre can entrench students' precarity.

While not a perfect solution, virtual writing consultations create opportunities for radical care. And, I have noticed that more EAL students visit me virtually. Students have more choice about where they join a virtual consultation from, and they often talk more freely about why they visited the tutor, perhaps because they aren't being observed and don't risk being labeled students "in need" or "at risk." Students can even turn their videos entirely off, allowing them to connect without being seen. Students may use this option to decentralize parts of themselves that they worry might be negatively judged by others. Virtual consultations therefore better position the writing centre as a place to learn and share strategies for surviving the precarious world of academia, perhaps especially for those who experience the most acute academic precarity.

## FEELING WITH, RATHER THAN FEELING FOR
My name is Mackenzie. I first began my writing centre work as a

Writing and Learning Peer Educator, but my term was cut short by the pandemic. I was hired as Graduate Writing Facilitator in September 2021, as the university returned to in-person instruction. I am a white, cis-male settler, and I am the youngest co-author— what some might term a "digital native." I'm also the least fond of virtual consultations. Throughout the virtual turn, I have maintained an affinity for in-person work, and this sentiment has been echoed by many students I work with. However, I don't believe it is necessary to pit virtual against in-person. Rather, the practice of radical care in writing centre work necessitates flexibility and a high degree of choice for tutors, students, and staff. After all, the provision of care necessitates accessibility *of* the care provided.

The primary aspect of virtual consultations I find limiting is that, for me, they carry an innately impersonal element. Because we are no longer in a shared physical space, virtual consultations can create barriers to organic connection, causing the tutor and student to feel removed from one another. This distancing makes it more difficult for me to put myself in the student's shoes, and, as a consequence, I find it easier to feel *for them*, rather than *with* them. By this, I mean that instead of fostering and engaging in an intimate, collaborative process in which I experience empathy for the individuals with whom I work, virtual methods promote a more sympathetic stance: I understand the students' concerns but do not feel them myself. Furthermore, the virtual consultation software we use presents students' assignments front and centre, while only providing a small window in the top corner for video conferencing. As a result, students and tutors alike are attending centrally to the piece of writing, rather than to each other. The focus of these consultations is the product itself, not the individuals involved. For me, this set up puts the focus on "academic" results, thus dampening the shared feeling and acknowledgment of "non-academic" concerns that I have often experienced during in-person consultations.

### AFFECTIVE CONNECTIVE TISSUE: LINKING AN INNER SELF TO AN OUTER WORLD

My name is Kate. A Graduate Writing Facilitator since 2018, I assisted the writing centre's virtual shift when the pandemic began. I am a white settler completing PhD research that uses virtual spaces for collaborative storytelling. As a public high school teacher, I was offered access in 2010 to technology for virtual connection. My students and I slipped through pre-Zoom portals, swapping windows with activists and climate scientists. Virtual space became the connective tissue that joined us.

In the newness of the pandemic, the virtual was familiar, as was the

facilitation space: one person arrived with writing, and one with a reader's eyes. Our shared learning environment was enhanced by what flowed from my homespace to theirs, from theirs to mine: a glass jar filled with paint brushes that jostled as the student searched for a pen, steam rising from a white cup.

*"They are so noisy," she apologizes. I had been wondering about the loud, non-human voices. The student tells me she lives at the edge of a tropical forest. It is 4:00 a.m. in her time zone, and birds in the forest are waking up. I am suddenly aware of the gift of someone else's life—and ecosystem—leaking into my much-less-interesting home space.*

How do I compare the multisensory virtual portal with the industrial learning space of the writing centre: unremarkable flooring, uniform tables, and chairs whose plastic form is shaped to cup an *average* body—not an *every*body. Within the neutralized space of the physical writing centre, we asked students to revise sensory passages, while the windows beside us remained closed, buffering the sounds and sensations beyond. The pandemic required us to throw those windows open, connecting our sensory worlds.

The two-way flow of sensory landscapes through shared portals mimics the flows of learning I experience as a writing facilitator: in helping students, I am nourished by their ideas. I see universities as ecologies. Sharon Feiman-Nemser seeks a "connective tissue [to hold] things together within or across different phases of learning" (1049)—a cohesive infrastructure across learning spaces, phases, and events. Writing centres perform this connective role: students flow through from all parts of the university, seeking care for their learning. The pandemic enhanced this flow by allowing intimacies of the different worlds we inhabit to slip in, slip out, and to commingle in a shared virtual space.

## SLIPPING OUT, SLIPPING IN
McKinney's call for a more critical reading of writing centre spaces, including recognition that there is no universal and culturally-neutral "home space," aligns with Romeo Garcia's observation that "in this global current, difference seems to matter less and less, and with the erosion of local culture due to the production of homogenized global spaces …, it seems commonplace to flatten and/or erase the coexistence of other histories" (41). In attempting to create "cozy, home spaces" within institutions by furnishing writing centres with "round tables, art, plants, couches, and coffee pots" (McKinney 6), we are complicit in flattening conceptions of both home and care. This flattening includes the association between

"care" and feelings of "comfort" and "coziness." Of course, writing centres have never been equally comfortable or cozy for all. Garcia puts it succinctly: "For me, the writing center is neither my safe space nor my home" (48). Using the lens of radical care allows us to extend this point by examining how associating care with good feelings of coziness and comfort ultimately undermines the potential for writing centre carework. In perpetuating this association, we may unwittingly undermine the actual potential of our care by positioning ourselves as spaces to help students feel better *about* their writing, instead of as networks of "affective connectivity" that empower students to feel, write, learn, and care *with us* as strategies for survival.

Micki McGee writes, "that capitalism has a care problem is by no means a new observation" (39). Similarly, it is not a new observation that writing centres are constructed as spaces where carework can take place on campus. According to Renee Pistone, formal classrooms are not easily able to engage a "caring tutoring approach" because they are constrained by time, resources, and a one-to-many teaching framework (10). Writing centres, on the other hand, "have the luxury" of caring (Pistone). In this paper, we have posed the question of whether the COVID-19 pandemic has opened new possibilities for care, challenging us to recognize that our care is not, in fact, a luxury, but a radical necessity of our work.

Through the virtual turn, we physically slipped out of the institutional space, and conceptually slipped out of our habituated understandings of the writing centre and our roles within it. In these moments, the writing centre was less a space than an "affective connective tissue" of humans engaging in the shared work of caring—caring with one another about the high stakes work of learning and writing in precarious times.

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