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# Capturing the Voices of Contingent Faculty Through Reflective Journaling During the COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown with Oscar Fernandez and Ami Sommariva

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Welcome to PDXPLORES, a Portland State Research Podcast featuring scholarship, innovations, and discoveries, pushing the boundaries of knowledge, practice, and what is possible for the benefit of our communities and the world.

Oscar Fernandez: Hola, me nombre es Dr. Oscar Fernandez. I'm an Assistant Professor in University Studies. My academic discipline centers on representation of disease in Latin American literature. Originally, I focused a great deal on HIV/AIDS in the late 1980s and 1990s, and more currently, I'm looking at how COVID-19 has impacted the lives of contingent faculty, and a third piece of my research is describing what QTBIPOC students experience in academia, QTBIPOC stands for Queer Trans Black Indigenous Peoples of Colors.

Ami Sommariva: And my name is Ami Sommariva. I'm an adjunct assistant professor in the University Studies program. I'm an American cultural historian that focuses on themes of anti-black racism, gender, public feelings, popular culture, and environmental discourse in the second half of the 20th century. Right now, I'm revising an article that examines representations of masculinity, race, and wilderness in the 1977 Roots mini-series. Additionally, I'm working towards revising my dissertation into a scholarly book that examines the role of popular television programs in changing the way Americans defined and discussed racism in public culture between the years 1965 and 1980.

Oscar Fernandez: The context for this paper was, of course, the pandemic, something that we continue to experience today. Back in March 2020, when our university, like so many other universities, shut down, due to the pandemic, I started reflecting on what meaning can I come up with because of this historic moment. We are about to experience something that humanity, I guess, had not experienced in at least 80, 90 years since the last worldwide epidemic. So I started thinking about “What can I do as a contingent faculty? Are the voices of contingent faculty captured in so much of the research that was happening in 2020 and that will continue to happen post 2020?” So the context was that the epidemic are the voices of contingent faculty and higher ed captured? The paper ended up being called “The Benefits of Reflective Journaling During COVID-19: Contingent Faculty Examine Impacts on Academic Lives and Student Center Teaching”.

Ami Sommariva: When I got Oscar's email inviting me to participate in the project, I was immediately interested in the opportunity to make something useful out of the chaos and uncertainty that characterized the beginning of the pandemic. Plus, it also seemed like a good way to develop relationships with my colleagues. Contingent faculty members are defined as instructors that lack the employment security and therefore intellectual freedom that faculty on the tenure track enjoy. That includes adjuncts or part-time faculty, full-time faculty that are not eligible for tenure, sometimes called instructors, lecturers, or visiting assistant professors, as well as TAs, postdocs, clinical faculty, and others. Basically contingent faculty are instructors whose employment is contingent on any number of things that may or may not have to do with their performance as scholars

and teachers, and there are a lot more of us than you might think. In 2018, the American Association of University Professors determined that 73% of all postsecondary instructional positions in the United States were contingent positions. That trend is only increasing as higher learning institutions are pushed to adopt practices analogous to just-in-time manufacturing to reduce costs and increase their agility in the marketplace. In effect, conditional faculty are instructional expenditures that colleges and universities can easily adjust in response to changing financial landscapes.

Oscar Fernandez: In this study, we used something called reflective journaling as the basis for gathering our thoughts during the March 2020 government shutdown of our university, and I was looking for a methodology that would honor our voices and our experiences at the moment, in the moment we were experiencing COVID-19 in our lives and in our classrooms. And reflective journaling is something that I came up with through some work with the Office Of Academic Innovation at Portland State University. A colleague of ours, Dr. Daniel Stevens, is a huge proponent of doing reflective journaling in higher ed.

And so, I leaned on those workshops that were offered by the Office of Academic Innovation in order to come up with a reasonable trustworthy methodology for our self-reflection study. In a nutshell, reflective journaling is journaling that happens through some guided prompts, and the journalist follows those guided prompts to journal about an event or a problem or a situation. Generally, the literature review on reflective journaling is about reflecting on a practice that happens in a classroom and

whether or not that practice is effective, does it meet the curricular objectives?

Reflective journaling is normally more practiced in high school settings, in the secondary, primary school settings by teachers in high schools and middle schools. I was really curious to see if reflective journaling would be an apt methodology in higher ed among faculty. You know, we're so not used to being self-reflective. But I thought this moment in history, when the pandemic is affecting our personal and work lives, reflective journaling is the one way that we can capture authentic experiences through the act of reflective journaling. One of the benefits of reflective journaling for this study was that it captured what we were experiencing in the moment. What we did for those first 10 weeks of the government shutdown is we kept a diary, a journal, based on three prompts. And so, for those 10 weeks, the co-authors kept a journal based on those three prompts. And we then coded those prompts using something called Envivo coding. And we came up with themes. The neat thing about reflective journaling is that the co-authors ourselves, we came up with the three prompts. And there were three open-ended prompts that would elicit insight. And we didn't know what the outcome was going to be from the reflective journaling. We did not come into this project saying, I already have an argument about how was the experience for the group, so, it was really interesting that reflective journaling really gave us some new insights about what it means to be contingent faculty during the first 10 weeks of the government shutdown due to COVID.

Ami Sommariva: The experiences contingent faculty had with emergency remote teaching are crucial for understanding the impact of the pandemic on higher education.

Because contingent faculty do most of the teaching at the post-secondary level.

According to PSU's Human Resources website, 33% of credit hours at PSU are taught by tenure track faculty. That means that 67% of credit hours are taught by contingent faculty. So, we have a significant effect on what students learn, how they learn it, and how their learning is evaluated.

Oscar Fernandez: The objective of this self-reflection study was to capture a moment in time. This is a point in time study and it tries to summarize and describe experiences that contingent faculty experienced at Portland State during those first 10 weeks. We were really keen on capturing this moment in time so that future historians, future professors, will look back in time and say, this is what a few contingent faculty at an urban university experienced as COVID-19 impacted our personal and our academic lives.

Ami Sommariva: Emergency remote teaching caused me to re-examine how I practiced my teaching as an adjunct assistant professor. Students told me that they were struggling with isolation, anxiety, depression, illness, and grief. Although not all faculty feel that it's their responsibility to take students' emotional states into account, it's no secret that stress is a barrier to learning. So, I tried to make our remote course a place where they could build community and process what was happening around them while staying within the course description. It was the American Identity Sophomore Inquiry course, so I selected readings on how identity affects healthcare in the U.S. and how marginalized groups have fought for and secured greater equity through collective

action. I hope students would find it empowering. I also thought that I could revise the social framework of the course in a way that would ease their isolation and anxiety, because I was not optimistic about the sort of student-centered teaching that could be done with 36 students in one Zoom meeting on a laptop screen.

Oscar Fernandez: One of the interesting discussion points that we do in the book chapter is discuss how the pandemic affected our emotional labor, it is probably a no-brainer at this point among all of us that the pandemic did impact how much emotional labor we were doing with students. These one-on-one interactions where we were listening to our students share their experiences with us around COVID-19, it also did not help us at PSU back in 2020 that we were experiencing forest fires, we were also experiencing social unrest on campus due to police brutality. So, we were listeners to a series of crises back in 2020 and I would suspect even till today. One of the interesting things that our findings came out with, was that our participants as faculty, we really over-described the emotional states of our students and when we analyzed our journals, we did not really talk a lot about our feelings as contingent faculty teaching with stressed students. We really did not describe our emotional states. So in our chapter, we talk about why is it that faculty and contingent faculty since the authors are all contingent faculty, how come contingent faculty were reluctant in our diary journals that we were writing just for ourselves? We really did not use adjectives as much to describe our emotional states compared to the overabundance of adjectives that we use for students. The chapter discussion we really talked about that academia in general does not honor the discussion of emotional states by teachers. What academia

generally prioritizes is intellect, is content, is discipline but not our emotional lives. We also concluded that the skirting of emotional lives by contingent faculty in this study is a result of our training as PhD students and MA students, we're trained to be disciplinarians of content, not disciplinarians of our emotional lives.

One other finding that was very interesting from using Envivo coding of our journal entries was student-centered teaching came back in our reflective journals. So many of the co-authors talked about that we use the pandemic as cover to really honor student-centered teaching that we were doing pre-pandemic. So the pandemic gave us an alibi and excuse to be even more student-centered teaching. We discussed in our book chapter why is that? This is very strange that during the pandemic we were justifying being student-centered. We concluded that in academia student-centered teaching is something that we are not always comfortable coming out of the closet because in promotion purposes as contingent faculty we really need to exhibit our knowledge of the content of the discipline. And sometimes student-centered teaching is, in promotion guidelines, is considered kind of "me" work that we are just hanging out with students. Whereas you know the true nature of student-centered teaching is you have to practice deep listening, you also have to know your stuff, but you also have to be willing to know the emotional lives of our students because they're learning. Knowing the emotional lives of our students is part of the learning process. So, it's really interesting to see in our diary journals that at least now during that government shutdown during those 10 weeks, we really leaned on our student-centered teaching, and we were unashamed of being student-centered.



One of the key recommendations is the power of reflective journaling in times of crisis. Obviously, we continue to experience COVID-19, but in future crises, and these could be pandemic, it could be institutional, what leveraged the power of reflective journaling to make sense of what people on the ground are experiencing. Reflective journaling is one way to voice, I think more authentically, what people experience on the ground. In our case, it was faculty, contingent faculty, specifically, already a precarious group of people. What were they experiencing during a moment of crisis?

Ami Sommariva: In the article we discuss emotional labor. Emotional labor is a term that refers to the work of managing other people's emotions. So, teaching, in general, is a type of work that requires a lot of managing other people's emotions as well as a lot of managing of our own emotions because we are trying to create an emotional context for students in which they feel engaged and are able to remember the things that we do in the class.

Oscar Fernandez: Another recommendation from this study is asking universities to do more work around who is doing emotional labor on campus, and ask those faculty who are doing emotional labor what do they need from other faculty, from administrators so that they find work life balance?

Ami Sommariva: I hope that this article will contribute to the conversation that university administrators, and department chairs, and faculty of all stripes are having about contingent faculties' place in higher education generally. Since we are the majority of

the educators on university and college campuses our experience has a significant effect on the experiences that students are having in the university.

I'm Ami Sommariva and I teach and write about 20th century American cultural history.

Currently, I'm working towards writing a scholarly book that examines the role of popular television programs in changing the way Americans defined and discussed racism between the years 1965 and 1980.

Oscar Fernandez: Hola, my name is Dr. Oscar Fernandez, I specialize in inter-American studies, literary theory, and the intersection of culture, sexuality and the representation of disease in American literature. Additionally I examine experiences by contingent faculty and QTBIPOC students in academia.

Thank you for listening to PDXplores. If you liked what you heard on this episode, please rate and follow the show anywhere you get your podcasts.