

**Reading and Writing with the Times:  
What Covid-19 Taught Me about My Creative Writing Classroom**

Megan Paonessa

*North Central College*

Late one quarantined Thursday night, my Beginning Fiction students and I got into a conversation about the ending of Kelly Link's fabulist story, *Stone Animals*, on our class Twitter page. Having tagged all the authors of works we were reading that semester, Link was alerted to our conversation and graciously interrupted our debate. She tweeted, "I like to think that, sometimes, the point of a story can be to raise a question that stays with the reader. The direction should be clear, but a too-tidy ending can mean that a story doesn't linger much past the turn of the page."

"Brilliant!" we all thought. An explanation straight from the mouth of the author. The conversation picked up.

Then editor Ellen Datlow chimed in, and writer Aimee Bender tweeted the next morning. Our examination of *Stone Animals* had broadened into a discussion of how contemporary fiction was changing, encompassing more speculative work that had previously been too "genre" for the literary canon. Link's work was notorious for straddling this genre/literary fence, but she had pressed on. She tweeted, "Part of figuring out how to make writing work long term is figuring out how to incorporate the dynamics, tropes, pieces in your own work that give you the most pleasure. (The things that you love so much that you pick up a book for them even though you know how that story goes.)" In other words, Link was telling us to write what you love to read. My students ate it up.

The next morning, our in-class writing (via Zoom) took more risks. Our discussions were loud and included more voices than our previous ones. The class was *fun* — as creative writing classes should be.

This is what I learned about teaching during a pandemic: writers were more likely to be available and willing to jump into a classroom and Zoom or tweet or email about their work, and it made my classroom more vibrant and interesting for myself and the students. This enthusiasm is necessary for a department that is continually seeing their enrollment numbers drop.

Before the pandemic, I used Blackboard's wiki feature to encourage my classes to make their writing public-facing. They created blogs and websites and podcasts, and their talents became more recognized, their voices stronger, and their academic abilities to research and

present texts more honed. Using technology in the pre-pandemic classroom made my students look at their writing with new eyes, and as they collaborated in groups, pulling ideas together like a Wikipedia page with multiple, unknown authors, they learned to critique the work as an editor might, without bias or ownership, presenting the work at its best. Inside the pandemic, however, this practice fell short.

As Zoom classrooms became the norm inside the pandemic, and teachers looked for more engaging ways to encourage discussion, it was not enough to supply an online venue to submit work or post observations. Feedback was essential. In hindsight, this seems obvious, but when we professors were so used to meeting students in the classroom and during office hours, able to follow up with them before or after class, the typical email or written comments on a paper failed to have the impact they were expected to. We were away from our students for too long. It's why even the most introverted of us started missing in-person classrooms. Past the scrambling phase of getting all our work online, past the phase where Covid-19 was some crazy occurrence and, "Isn't this kinda fun to be working from home?" Past all that, we were still isolated, still online, and still in the middle of a pandemic. We missed human contact.

Thankfully, we'll be going back to the classroom in the fall. Maybe some classrooms will stay online, but I predict those classrooms will be largely research-focused or independent study courses. On the whole, we can get back to teaching as we used to, only our toolbox has expanded. Don't forget that toolbox. We must change with the times, as they say. Grow up. Expand. Adjust.

I encourage writers, thinkers, speakers to continue to be available online to our students, though I know busy schedules often get in the way of such kindnesses. Using multi-modal examples to shake things up in the classroom, while beneficial (I love myself a good TedTalk), are not as impactful as real-time discussions in which students participate in higher-order thinking. Perhaps these online interactions can be seen as mutually beneficial. Not only as a means to inspire, but as a way to open minds and connect to diverse ways of thinking.

Kelly Link wrote a tweet to my creative writing students about writing what you love to read. I'd like to add to that: *Writers should write what they enjoy writing, whether it's mainstream, literary, genre, or academic, and they should read the authors that write like them.* As students explore why they like the writing they do, practicing and perfecting their craft as they go, eventually, they'll stumble. They'll want to give up. Instead, tell them to go online and find one of the authors they admire. Give them a shout. One of them may be online and up for a chat.