

## **Balancing Early Days of Motherhood and Academia During COVID-19: Creative Writing Communities of Practice**

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### **Introduction**

There has been an increased focus on female academics during the COVID-19 pandemic, as researchers have been investigating the disproportionate impacts of the lockdown on participation and productivity in the workplace (Cui, Ding, & Zhu, 2020). Participation and productivity are primarily being studied according to funding applications and awards, manuscript submissions, and publications, among others (Cui, Ding, & Zhu, 2020; Fazackerley, 2020; Flaherty, 2020; Frederickson, 2020; Malisch et al. 2020; Shurchcov, 2020; Viglione, 2020). These results control for several factors and examine the variables compared to male counterparts' research outcomes, as well as females' research outcomes compared to themselves in the months prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the same time the previous academic year. Numerous open-access repositories and preprint server platforms have been reviewed and reveal the following narratives:

- Female academics are involved in increased childcare and household responsibilities relative to their male counterparts;
- Female academics' working papers/preprints are not growing as quickly relative to their male counterparts;
- Female academics' publishing rates have fallen relative to their male counterparts; and
- Female academics' solo-authored submissions have declined relative to their male counterparts (Buckee, et al., 2020; Cui, Ding, & Zhu, 2020; Fazackerley, 2020; Flaherty, 2020; Frederickson, 2020; Malisch et al., 2020).

While most analyses are preliminary and are presented within various post-secondary education media sources and magazines (Fazackerley, 2020; Flaherty, 2020; Frederickson, 2020), there are informative working paper and preprint series that are permitting empirically-driven discussions (Cui, Ding, & Zhu, 2020). In a particularly rigorous study featured in the COVID-19 electronic-print series produced by Cornell University, researchers from the Goizueta Business School and the Harvard Business School examine data collected from the largest open-access preprint repository for the Social Sciences. Overall, 41,858 research preprints authored by 76,832 authors across 18 disciplines and 25 countries were reviewed and determined that, since the lockdown began, female academics have produced approximately 14%–18% less research papers compared to their male colleagues in the United States (Cui, Ding, & Zhu, 2020). This intensified productivity gap appeared across several disciplines and was more pronounced for those working in top-ranked universities (Cui, Ding, & Zhu, 2020).

Post-secondary education administrators and funding agencies have been implementing several policies and procedures to mitigate this loss of productivity, which include suspending teaching evaluations, extending annual outcomes reports, lengthening tenure clocks, and providing

increased timelines for internal and external grants and awards (Malisch et al., 2020). It has been argued that, while these gender-neutral policies and procedures might be constructive, post-secondary institutions also need to be protecting a pipeline of female academics that may be disadvantaged due to exclusion from senior positions that require tenure, research grants that demand tenured primary investigators, and early career research grants that possess five-year restrictions from earned doctoral degree date (Buckee, et al., 2020; Fazackerley, 2020; Flaherty, 2020; Malisch et al., 2020; Zimmer, 2020).

### **The Female Academic and COVID-19 Restrictions and Relationships**

Within this article, the narratives featured above regarding female academics' participation and productivity in the workplace are contrasted and complemented with intentional opportunities for personal and professional relationships and mentorships that have arisen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The following sections feature an online Creative Writing Community that is serving as a critical-collaborative space for female academics to explore their own narratives, integrating creative and academic writing identities as a means of community problem-solving and mentoring. As an early career female academic, the author provides a sampling of poetry and prose completed during the writing sessions and analyzes its significance as a creative medium for expression when encountering personal and professional challenges. The creative writing process and connected community in which the creative works are shared encourages critical discussion and deliberation. Concerned with the fundamental female academic participation and productivity complications we are reading and experiencing, this inventive form of expression is providing moments for reflection.

While this is a potentially overwhelming moment for female academics, studies also indicate that we have the ability to make meaningful personal and professional relationships and when effectively mentored are more likely to remain in our careers, receive increased grant incomes, and achieve higher-level promotions (Blankson, Brown, & Evrensel, 2015; Kotsoopoulos, 2019; Previato, 2015). A crucial support mechanism, especially for early-career female academics, is peer mentoring that recognizes the circumstances confronted by female academics, reflects departmental culture, and provides a voice for communicating concerns that arise and addresses them proactively (Blankson, Brown, & Evrensel, 2015). A confidence culture that materializes in discussions and debates, policies and procedures, and initiatives and programs designed to promote female academics is required (Gill & Orgad, 2017; Schor, 1997).

Throughout the literature several mentorship practices and processes are highlighted, but a particularly successful strategy is constructing a community of practice among faculty members with shared concerns, problems, and interests in a topic (Ashencaen Crabtree & Shiel, 2018; Pooneh & Barton, 2017). In these communities, collective teaching, learning, dialogue, debate, and guidance are provided and produced and the shared voices are strengthened (Pooneh & Barton, 2017).

## Creative Writing Communities of Practice

*If the most efficacious learning occurs when learning is re-enforced, then writing through its inherent re-enforcing cycle involving hand, eye, and brain marks a uniquely powerful multi-representational mode for learning (Emig, 1977).*

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, as an early career female academic, my involvement in an online creative writing community of practice provided a needed sympathetic and supportive environment. The situation that I was encountering included having recently returned from maternity leave to an academic year that I thought would be imperative in promoting productivity towards my tenure and promotion applications (for submission in 2020 and 2021). After having the privilege of spending the majority of an academic year at home with my first child, this time was essential to complete teaching redevelopments, research projects, grant applications, and attend national and international committee and board meetings in my field. While I am able to report that all of these endeavours are still occurring, they are moving forward with much slower strides and it has been challenging to continue. Within a few months of my return to the Faculty of Education, I am working from home again with my infant son running around underfoot which is, in all honesty, both a pleasure and a problem. With all the feelings of maternity leave overcoming me again, it was important that there was mentorship within my fragmented working days and evenings. A mentoring community that would invigorate and influence my writing outcomes alongside my personal and professional coping mechanisms was necessary.

As Janet Emig's (1977) seminal article, "Writing as a Mode of Learning," and referenced above communicates, the writing process is experienced, self-rhythmed, and most importantly connected to others because writers are constantly anticipating the needs of readers and forming associations through language and imagery. Appropriately, several members of the Faculty of Education situated within a mid-sized research-intensive university have been engaging weekly within a Creative Writing Community as an innovative and independent means of expressing ourselves and our emotions during these unpredictable times. We recognized that while connections and relationships between ourselves and our students were once organic in nature (hallway conversations, coffee meetings, and knocks at the door for clarifications), these interactions must now occur using alternative methods, and creative writing is providing a space for this mentoring and networking.

This online Creative Writing Community consists of pre-service teacher, adult, and mature educators and researchers. The Creative Writing Community meets 60-90 minutes weekly, the structure for which includes checking in with one another, sharing personal and professional apprehensions, reading writers' poetry and prose consecutively according to the prompts we have collaboratively prepared, and engaging in roundtables for constructive commentary. The community consists of several tenured and untenured members at various stages in their

academic careers and represents several sub-disciplines (Indigenous education, literacy education, arts-based education, counselling education, and post-secondary education).

The creative works composed and shared allow members to express challenges they are experiencing personally and professionally while combining creative and academic writing as a means of community problem-solving and reciprocal mentor and mentee relationships. As a primarily female academic-based community, mentorship is located throughout the fellowship offered by faculty members from varying backgrounds that have an innate ability to relate to one another from discipline, gender, and positionality perspectives (Blankson, Brown, & Evrensel, 2015). We have been composing creative writing and analyzing the creative process academically as a means of exploring creative writing as a pedagogy for improving our mental wellness, critical thinking, and academic performance (Peary, 2015; Yoo, 2017).

### **It Looks Like My Life Has Been Lived in by Pigs**

It is known that creative writing embodies strong narrative elements that are employed to examine critical incidents in the lives of the authors as perceived from their personal points of view (Wiebe, 2015; Leggo, 2005). As a pedagogy, narratives composed in the first person, in which the writer becomes a character, stimulate the application of course concepts, since students must locate and relate the relevancy of the concepts they are encountering as personally affecting themselves (Peary, 2015). As faculty members, we are applying the creative writing pedagogies that we share with our students amongst ourselves as a means of revitalizing fellowship and mentorship during this unsettling time. Narratives with careful selection of detail trigger learning, as this form of creative writing requires that the author reviews and selects from many details provided the minute ones for inclusion that are significant to the story for communication (Manery, 2015; Peary, 2015).

My narrative that has been woven throughout the COVID-19 pandemic includes a mixture of word play and physical play each day with my little one, while endeavoring to continue making progress towards achieving academic promotion and tenure and motherhood. As a child, one of my favourite books was *Jillian Jiggs* (1985), which details vividly in colourful poetic prose and pictures the adventures of childhood and motherhood. This imaginative book was written by famous children's author, Phoebe Gilman, and in determining a means for communicating my narrative it was this work that came to mind. Recently having entered motherhood, it became evident that during the COVID-19 pandemic, Phoebe Gilman would likely express that "it looks like my life has been lived in by pigs" to rephrase her whimsical writing. For those that might not be familiar with the world of *Jillian Jiggs*, this children's book is the first in a series of five adventures about a little girl that loves dressing up and playing pretend; her mother continually asks that she clean up her messes but receives fanciful excuses instead.

In gathering with the Creative Writing Community for the first time online in the wake of this pandemic, I composed and read the following piece composed in the style of Phoebe Gilman's book, mimicking the phrasing and running repetition, based on my new narrative and the struggles encountered as a female academic:

### ***Dancing Our Own Little Jiggs***

A long time ago, when I knew nothing about what was small,  
This Mom, Mom, Mom, Mom missed that thrilling and sometimes troublesome call.

“Those were the days,” that footprints were spotless on the wood floor,  
As I looked round my closet and still appreciated what I wore.  
For now, I dress for exhilarating days of blocks, socks, fox, truck, duck, muck, shucks,  
And the little voice that teaches me about learning all those constructs.

“Mom, Mom, Mom, Mom!  
Look what I am doing over here, please come...”  
“Later. I promise. As soon as I teach, grade, write, meet, analyze, and review,  
I’ll come paint my hands. I promise, I do...”

Now, Mom, Mom, Mom, Mom meant very word about work that she said,  
But later she realized that there were so few hours in a day before bed.  
When the little blonde haired head runs by with a giggle,  
A Mom just has to, just has to go wriggle and wiggle!

Oh look at the books with their many textures and colours,  
There are bakers, doctors, gardeners, and firefighters under their covers.  
I am glad that you joined me in pointing out boats, trains, and planes,  
No one will guess that we are lions with orange, shaggy, manes.

“Mom, Mom, Mom, Mom!  
Look what I am doing over here, please come...”  
“Later. I promise. As soon as I teach, grade, write, meet, analyze, and review,  
I’ll come touch my feet. I promise, I do...”

Now, Mom, Mom, Mom, Mom meant very word about work that she said,  
But later she realized that it was important to touch your hands to your head.  
When two little eyes appear between their knees with a smile,  
A Mom just has to, just has to go move in style!

Oh look at the patterns we can make with our bodies,  
Waving arms and stomping feet have become my new hobbies.  
I am glad that you joined me in moving to the beat,  
No one will guess that this is what we do throughout the day on repeat!

No one would guess, but a Mom, Mom, Mom, Mom would know,  
A Mom, Mom, Mom, Mom, just keeps dancing and goes with the flow.

### Creative Writing as Catharsis

When reading the adventures of *Jillian Jiggs* at a young age, it never would have occurred to me that the storyline from this children's book would become my coping mechanism during this time of anxiety. In returning to the poetic prose located throughout this book in an attempt to reassemble the narrative from the mother's viewpoint, I realized that instead of being drawn from play to work I have been contending with being drawn from work to play throughout the last few months. While it is wonderful having this influence in my life, it is also isolating when engaging with colleagues, timelines, and deadlines that have not ceased despite the realities we are currently combatting. Instead, groundbreaking calls for publications, research applications, and funding mechanisms investigating the impact of COVID-19 have been surfacing, which apply increased pressure for academic contributions.

Creative writing functions as a cathartic exercise, and this community of practice has allowed the members involved to secure roots personally and professionally as we come to know one another in more meaningful ways. During this unsettling time, we are relying on these roots when the leaves and branches above are constantly moving and stability is required. Engagement with creativity is permitting us to explore uncommon access routes and possess precise language choice, alternative points of view, and an eye for the story at play (McVey, 2008). We have collectively realized that creative writing, the poetry, imagery, narrative, and drama, is providing a space for our emotions and improving our academic writing. The mentorship that has emerged through our writing has been valuable, as the concepts confronted during this crisis within our practice are being transformed into a source of strength. When sharing my personal poetic compilation above, the members of this community of practice offered pertinent resources, guiding comments, and thoughtful considerations with regard to my balancing early days of motherhood and academia.

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