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COVID-19, Productive Ambiguity, and Keeping On

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“Nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change.”
— Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Frankenstein (1818)

At the beginning of the 2019–2020 school year, I would have never imagined that Friday, the thirteenth of March, could possibly be the last day I would see my students face-to-face that year, heralding the end of “normal” instruction. Indeed, it was the end of “normal” life, as suddenly the COVID-19 pandemic hit locally in the United States, shuttering businesses, schools, and universities; mandating the wearing of face masks; ceasing all in-person meetings; and necessitating all instruction suddenly be shifted online to virtual “remote” learning. Along with these great changes, came great losses for many of us: loss of community, loss of stability, and, not least, loss of loved ones.

Throughout these past months of upheaval, we have been challenged to reflect and adapt, to learn new ways of nurturing community, to find comfort in the familiar that remains, and to appreciate more deeply the people and the connections that inspire us to keep moving forward, despite all obstacles, no matter how incrementally. Such has been the essence of my connection with my dear colleagues at i.e.: inquiry in education—and I am grateful for their sustaining collegiality and focus on the meaningful work this journal engenders that keeps us connected and moving forward, together.

As I sat down to review the manuscripts for the Fall 2020 issue of i.e. in the context of this strange new surreal world of quarantine and social distance, I contemplated the robust stack of manuscripts, wondering if this tried-and-true habit of diving into research articles would still provide the customary thrill. Or, had the pandemic usurped yet another joy? And what salient connections might I find therein, given the current landscape of research has been vastly altered? Ah, yes, another old familiar: the anxiety of the unknown. When confronted with old familiars, endeavor to remember practiced wisdoms.

In one of his selected letters for publication, the poet John Keats (1816–1817/2015) described: “Negative Capability, that is when [one] is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (capitalization from the original). The phrase “negative capability” has since been reframed as “productive ambiguity” and adopted by artists, and more recently by researchers, scientists, and mathematicians. Amidst chaos, a way to engage...
productive ambiguity is to find a center of calm and, despite the circumstances, be receptive to creative, unanticipated, and even unconventional possible solutions for exploration. Our current COVID-19 climate is certainly replete with chaos; the practice of productive ambiguity is one strategy that may prove beneficial.

In the articles in this issue of *i.e.*, the authors often take a creative approach to address pertinent issues. In *Determining the Leadership Potential of School Administrators Based on Data Triangulation*, authors Yenipinar, Yildirim, and Tabak address very timely pressing issues of leadership surrounding adaptation skills, stress tolerance and tolerance for ambiguity, and response to risk, complexity, and uncertainty.

The Leadership Potential (LP) variables under study include: having the ability to propose a different solution to the problem instantly and using creativity, running the decision-making process under pressure with autonomy, and managing complexity and uncertainty, among other leadership traits.

In *One Story Creates Another: Using Book Clubs to Promote Inquiry in the Content Areas*, author Randall investigates developing “new understandings while also viewing ‘difficulty as an opportunity to stop, reassess, and employ strategies for making sense of problems’” while giving an *au courant* window on the workshop model of pedagogy. In *Exploring EFL Student Teachers’ Perceptions of Student-Led Seminars*, Al-Amri examines student-led seminars as possible arenas of “creative controversy” and productive “conceptual conflict” to promote active learning such as learning though dialogue and debate. In *Participatory Approach to Program Evaluation Learning from Students to Improve Training in Biomedical Informatics*, author Guy engages PhD students in Group Level Assessment (GLA), a participatory program evaluation tool, to discover participants’ key themes for student support and program development. Authors Şahin and Çoban examine how short-term self-protective behaviors may interact with personal and organizational variables when environmental factors engender long-term use of defense mechanisms in *Effect of School Climate, Students’ Self-Handicapping Behaviors and Demographic Characteristics on Students’ Achievement*.

Perhaps relevant now more than ever, authors Filiz and Durnalı investigate the five social-emotional competencies targeted through Social Emotional Learning (SEL): responsible decision making, self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and relationship skills (CASEL, 2013) in their study *Examining the Relationship between Academic Motivation and Social-Emotional Competency in Student-Athletes*. Authors Selvitopu and Gün apply Kim’s (2001, 2005, 2027) cross-cultural adaptation theory to understand the perceptions of asylum seekers and other refugees for insight on establishing a new equilibrium, relief, and comfort in a radically new environment, in their study poignantly titled: “I feel so happy now” Afghan Students’ Cross-Cultural Adaptation Experiences in Turkey. In light of the current immigration experienced in Turkey, *The Competencies of the Culturally Responsive Teacher: What, Why and How?* by Karataş provides a cogent picture of the thoughts and aspirations of the present-day teaching force in Turkey in serving an increasingly diverse student body.

Experiences of Graduate Students on Out-of-School Learning Environment Applications by Bakioğlu investigates the understandings of science education graduate students about
education in out-of-school learning environments, and provides formative direction for course improvement, in seeking to expand pedagogical methods to meet the needs of all learners.

In Student Experiences of Socioeconomic School Integration in the Irish Secondary Context, Gleasure asks: “Can school truly embody ‘the great equalizer,’ as aspirationally posited by twentieth-century Massachusetts politician, Horace Mann? Or, does it contrarily represent a structure for the reproduction of inequality?” He investigates the issues surrounding students from low-SES segregated settings who choose to transition into socioeconomically integrated high schools, and their adaptations to their new environment.

In Co-Constructing a Learner-Centered, Democratic Syllabus with Teacher Candidates: A Poetic Rendering Of Students’ Meaning Making Experiences, Shugurova gives a nuanced insight into the disequilibrium experienced by pre-service teachers when presented with the unconventional task of negotiating their own student-centered syllabus, exploring in an emotionally safe and secure learning environment, engaging in democratic debate, and then settling into their self-determined novel norms.

In The Effect of Active Learning on Achievement and Attitude in a Vocational English Course, Özer utilizes the creative techniques of writing poetry, concept mapping, simulation, role-play, writing e-mails, script writing, and drama versus the conventional lecture method and their respective roles in facilitating English language learning.

The thrill is still there—I sincerely hope you will enjoy reading these creative and inspiring articles as much as I did. As of Friday, the thirteenth of November, my local school district has progressed to “Return to Normal School Operations Stage Three”: blended online instruction with optional in-class attendance two days per week, with class size limited for adequate social distancing. Who knows what the winter months will bring: continued return to normal, or regression due to virus and illness propagation, thus jeopardizing educational planning into the Winter and Spring 2021 academic terms? The unknowns are numerous. One thing we can be sure of are the lessons we have learned from the past eight months of pandemic: nurture your connections to vital community, find comfort in newly made familiar routines, and keep on keeping on—together—in whatever permutation possible. May the ambiguities be productive!

Carol A. Burg currently serves as an English language arts and social studies teacher in a rural, Title I elementary school in South Carolina. She also serves on the panel of reviewers for several journals: Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning (UK), The International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education (UK), The Qualitative Report (Nova Southeastern University, Ft. Lauderdale, FL), and Teacher Education Quarterly (University of the Pacific, CA). Carol’s professional foci include social justice, school leadership, change / school turnaround leadership, qualitative research, arts-based educational research, and doctoral student education and mentoring. For over 20 years, she served the National Louis University Florida Regional Center in various leadership capacities such as Academic Director, Florida EDL Doctoral Program Director, as well as associate professor teaching various educational leadership, education policy, curriculum, and research courses within the educational leadership (EDL) and teaching learning & assessment (TLA) graduate programs. Dr. Burg’s degrees include:
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References


