Chapter 13

Mask-making as Metaphor: A Vision for a New Research Praxis

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In the spring and summer of 2020, I, like so many others, sat at my decades-old Singer and stitched hundreds of cloth masks to donate. There was even some question of how well they would work, and yet that didn’t dampen our enthusiasm to make. Our local Craft Aid organization packed bags of fabric, thread, and elastic. I sewed the Deaconess mask, named for the Indiana health system that popularized the style, and it helped me feel useful and productive when everything else was falling apart. It was simple and repetitive, yet satisfying work. How fitting it was that I embraced the concept of masks, as my research has always centered on persona, a term that comes from “mask.” Similarly, my life has been filled with crafting and art, and it felt wrong not to use my sewing skills for good. It is important to note that I had the privilege of time, funds, and a stable job to support myself and my family during this time.

While we sewed, sources shared on social media showed us that the research productivity of many academics, especially women, tanked dramatically (Gabster, van Daalen, Dhatt, & Barry, 2020). Colleges and K-12 schools across the country moved online in a matter of days. Many institutional review boards shut down all research with human participants. Suddenly, our children were home and we were attempting to support their efforts at virtual schooling while also teaching our college students remotely. It seemed as if we would never stop doing dishes. Service continued and, in some cases, intensified, but for me and many others, research felt like a long-ago dream.

My rigorous doctoral training at the University of Virginia led me to view research as a complex, challenging goal that involved several interrelated and systematic steps. We sweated over our IRB submissions and navigated the politics of oversaturated local research settings. Since that time, I have shifted to supporting my graduate and undergraduate students with their own research. Over the last nine years the students in the teacher education program where I teach have completed action research projects that both embrace this view of research and challenge it: while students must write IRB proposals, collect data, and receive several rounds of feedback on their proposals and final project, often the analysis is not as technical as one might find in a traditional research article. The ultimate goal is for these preservice teachers to think like researchers and analyze their practice, and, of course, we have found that it helps when students have had exposure to these practices in the past (Davis, Clayton, & Broome, 2017).
Lessons from the Pivot

The Pivot as Opportunity

This year that we could never have imagined offers us the chance to re-envision our practices. What if we viewed research and writing through the same lens that sewists thought about mask making during and after this time? In both cases, we draw on the resources of our communities to produce things for others. The process benefits all involved for a plethora of reasons. Our masks offer several important lessons.

Masks look different for different settings; we can innovate with what we have.

In the beginning and in times of shortage, we reserved the most protective N95 masks for healthcare workers, while handmade fabric masks were suitable for the general public as they shopped for groceries. People repurposed stretchy fabric from T-shirts when they could not find elastic and cut up sheets and old clothes when they had no new fabric for their masks. Similarly, research looks different in different disciplines. Discussions with colleagues in other fields about research and review boards reveals just how complex the considerations are—centralized, permission-granting bodies like the IRB may not be valued or recognized in other cultures. My experience teaching journalism to secondary students and conducting oral history projects with college students and teachers shows that sometimes sharing a person’s actual name or even their image alongside their words can be the most powerful option. We must consider all aspects of the situation and all resources at our disposal before determining the best approach, whether for maskmaking or research.

Some masks are better than others, but something is better than nothing.

I will freely and openly admit that my masks are not perfect. Social media reveals new innovations in nosepiece pockets, elastic substitutes, kinds of linings, see-through windows, and many varied shapes; still, it’s all I can do to plug along at the Deaconess mask. Similarly, when our student researchers attempt to assemble large participant sample sizes or a flawless mixed-method design, they often lose sight of the real goal of the research: to learn more about a particular setting, and to learn from and build on the research that already exists. Learning from the process of conducting research is valuable to students in all content areas, even if the most intensive research processes are not possible.

Masks, amazingly, are a kind of political statement

In America in 2020 and beyond, wearing a mask in public symbolized, at least in some small way, a belief in the science of virus transmission. The same is true of research—when we conduct and share research, it means that we believe in learning from data. I work with teachers and preservice teachers; it is a field in which the battle between theory and practice is well documented. Lessons from history reveal that skepticism towards research is not unfounded, and certainly one can twist data for nefarious purposes, but when volunteer participants are protected and research designs are sound, research - action or otherwise - is crucial to the work of teachers and all academics.

In the absence of masks provided by a centralized organization, we make them ourselves to protect each other.
Lessons from the Pivot

The push for open access publications has arrived on our college campus, along with many others. When we remove barriers to accessing and producing research, we are able to obtain a clearer picture of more contexts.

Those who did not have the time, skill, or resources to sew donated money or found other ways to help; a local woman ordered elastic directly from Taiwan in enormous spools, and distributed them in smaller batches to sewists who needed it. Some academics, including some whose work appears in this volume, felt frustration that their institutions did not offer the training, support, or interactions they felt were needed. And so, we connected online, in huge groups on social media, with hashtags on Twitter, and in spontaneous Zoom happy hours and text threads, to support each other through our challenges, whether they were personal or professional.

Coda

Some say that we will never go back to the way things once were after this experience; that statement will likely be true for both personal and professional lives. Now and in the future, we must consider myriad questions: What counts as research, and why do we do it? How do we make the time for research when we are pulled in so many other directions? How do we share and promote our work? It is worth noting that blog posts or even Twitter threads approach the level of research and writing recommended here. Some moves that will help keep the general public informed of our work and that will suit our current times include the following:

- More networked blogs and podcasts where researchers can share their process and findings
- More support for open access publication, especially in the review of tenure files
- More use of blogs and open access texts for course readings and citations
- More high-quality open access texts and the time needed to produce them

Sewing, like research and teaching, is contemplative work. It has become so easy to lose track of the time that we need to think deeply about our work and the systems within which we operate. We must seize this opportunity to learn from our experiences and reshape our practices, interactions, and expectations for the future.

References
