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"You Will Have a COVID Baby?!": A Mama PhD Candidate's Critical Incidents

In this article, I explore a disruptive shift to pandemic instruction in March 2020 and the challenges COVID-19 brought to my personal and professional lives. I use three autoethnographic vignettes, coupled with social media posts, to answer the following research question: How did the global pandemic affect my identity negotiation as a mama PhD candidate in physical and digital spaces and my choices as a novice teaching associate (TA)? As a methodological approach, this article employs the critical incident technique (Tripp) in investigating digital identity construction through autoethnographic writing (Hanauer). The findings show that the pandemic dramatically influenced my identities as a mama PhD Candidate and TA in physical and digital spaces. Self-reflections on my digital identity negotiation during the pandemic helped me understand students' needs in terms of empathetic approaches to teaching, engaging students in personal types of writing, and providing spaces for students' creativity and agency. Through reflexivity, I found meaning and accepted different experiences during the pandemic. The article concludes with the pedagogical implications of the benefits of autoethnographic writing.

Introduction

> Understanding the critical need to continue our efforts to mitigate the coronavirus (COVID-19) transmission, [university name] will suspend all face-to-face classroom instruction for the remainder of the spring 2020 semester and transition to offering all instruction online.
>
> —Author's email communication

On March 16, 2020, at 9:24 a.m., I received an email from the university president stating that all classes were to be moved online due to the COVID-19 outbreak. At first, I was happy. I thought about all the time I would have to do

my homework, write a dissertation proposal, and spend time with my family. I was also pleased to stay home to protect my family from getting the virus. However, this happiness lasted only for a day or two. As soon as all my classes were moved online, campus facilities were closed, and my interactions with colleagues and friends were limited only to digital spaces. I understood that this quarantine was the worst scenario for an extrovert like me. As a reflexive teacher-scholar, to understand and help my inner self to get through the challenging times, I immediately started to write to let my mind speak about the events. I have realized long before that English writing liberates and legitimizes me as a transnational, multilingual individual who uses English as an additional language (EAL). Consequently, this autoethnographic article is my way of interrogating my digital identity shifts in light of critical incidents that affected my life during the pandemic year. Thus, here are the questions that guided this article:

1. In what ways has the global pandemic impacted my identity as a mama PhD candidate and my pedagogical choices as a novice teaching associate (TA)?
    a. How have I negotiated my identity in physical and digital spaces?
    b. How have my experiences influenced my pedagogical thinking?

Therefore, this article aims to reflect on critical personal incidents from March through December 2020 that contributed to my digital identity negotiation by examining social media posts and short vignettes. In reflecting on my identity negotiation process, I also appreciated the needs of students in online learning environments, including legitimizing students' digital writing practices and validating their personal experiences, feelings, and emotions during the pandemic**.** In addition, this article has pedagogical value, as it examines emergency remote learning instruction and its challenges to provide possible solutions from a novice TA's perspective. Finally, defining "mama PhD candidate" is essential because I consider it central to my identity negotiation. In this article, I use this term to refer to my embodied experience as both a mother and a pregnant mother during my PhD coursework and TA employment. In addition, I use the term "digital identity negotiation" in its postdigital understanding as a fluid construct with multiple facets, with implications for identity construction in the material and digital world. The term also understands identity as emerging, (re)imagined, and (re)constructed through the interaction of ideas, experiences, and knowledge.

The Gender Identity of a Mama PhD Candidate

The pandemic period brought a flow of memes about female academics as superwomen who can juggle various tasks. However, they were also portrayed as those who abandoned their kids, work or study. Moreover, Alana Priore notes a worrying fact that during the pandemic, there were far fewer submissions to journals by women: "Women academics are submitting fewer papers during coronavirus—with some fields like astrophysics reporting a 50 percent productivity loss among women" (para. 12). Social norms suggest that women should *do more, and that translates into women having to shoulder most of the responsibilities,* whereas men can usually devote more hours to working online while their wives take care of the children (Cunningham-Parmeter). This disproportional share of family responsibilities has always been a problem, even before the pandemic. However, the pandemic brought this problem to everyone's attention, and the topic is now being discussed more. Mothers need more support postpandemic than ever. Bonny Berry affirms that mothers are struggling because they are "mothering within a society that is misrepresenting, misleading and inadequately supporting" them (para. 10). As a mother of a toddler and an infant, a PhD candidate, a TA, and a wife, I second these challenges and would like society, as well as academia, to provide more support and understanding of the everyday realities mothers regularly face. The pandemic forced us to look at some of these systematic and gender inequity issues to transform how women and mothers are viewed.

Methodology

In this article, I use three short multimodal vignettes and social media posts related to the period or event described in the vignette. These data sources represent an autoethnographic method of inquiry to examine personal experiences of digital identity construction and negotiation in the digital and physical spaces I have inhabited or participated in. In the literature, personal writing has gained credibility as an inquiry approach to examining individual experiences (Clandinin and Connelly). In addition, Tony E. Adams et al. stated that autoethnography has allowed researchers to communicate their experience to wider audiences because "autoethnography, as a method, humanizes research by focusing on life as 'lived through' in its complexities, showing that you as readers and we as authors matter" (8). Genres, such as autobiographies, poetic narratives, and autoethnographies, are promoted in teacher education and teaching English to diverse learners because they can enhance their confidence as writers and engage them in critical and reflexive writing (Park, "Providing"). The autoethnographic method explores lived experiences. With the help of this methodology, the researcher can reconstruct

and analyze experiences to provide a more diversified view of individual experiences; it allows for deeper insights, interpretations, and nuanced views of the complexity of one's life and is also a radical method, since the researcher is the only source of validity of those experiences. Therefore, this type of writing demonstrates the process of identity construction and negotiation (Park, "My Autobiographical").

Autoethnographic writing develops meaningful literacy practices for language learners (Hanauer). Moreover, this type of writing can uncover meaningful literacy events connected to digital identity construction and negotiation through using words and rhetorical appeals, such as ethos, logos, pathos, and kairos. For example, Gloria Park uses narrative autobiographical snapshots to demonstrate the power of personal writing to investigate her identity within the continuum of privilege and marginalization ("My Autobiographical"). David Hanauer has expressed his emotions, thoughts, and understanding of the Holocaust by writing poems. In his article, Hanauer emphasizes the importance of poetry in articulating personal feelings of pain, horror, and fear. Finally, Carolyn Ellis and Crystal Patti have focused their work on telling the stories of Holocaust survivors via storytelling.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Carolyn Ellis and Joseph Rawicki used meaningful interviews and social media to interrogate their feelings of fear, anxiety, and isolation. Therefore, creative methodological approaches, such as narratives, poetry, autoethnographic essays, storytelling, meaningful interviews, and other genres, can uncover feelings, emotions, personal thoughts, and experiences to interrogate an individual's identity negotiation and construction. I follow the description of autoethnography by Suresh Canagarajah as "the genre can accommodate introspective research on one's memory, archival research on one's writing development, discourse analysis of one's literate artifacts" ("Negotiating" 47). My narrative autoethnography is introspective research of experiences connected to the shuttling between diverse digital and physical spaces.

Autoethnographic writing helps one understand complex facets of digital identity negotiation through reflexivity. Through my experiences during the pandemic, I understood what pedagogical choices I should make to humanize writing instruction. One of those choices was to include personal types of writings as much as possible. It is also a productive strategy to develop students' writing skills by engaging in analysis and critical thinking of their experiences. Moreover, this process develops students' metacognition and provides space for their creative expression.

Theoretical Framework

I use social identity theory (SIT) to examine how I negotiated my identity in physical and digital spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is vivid from the vignettes that my identity was (re)negotiated through the people with whom I interacted. In terms of identity construction, I enacted my identity in physical and digital spaces by reacting and expressing my thoughts and by choosing what kind of persona I wanted to portray on a particular day and what type of role I performed for each specific situation, whether it was a mother, a pregnant woman, a TA, a PhD student, or a Ukrainian woman. Because of my identity's multifaceted and complex nature, I was performing them all simultaneously in many, if not all, cases. To illustrate those shifts in my identity and my reflexive process, this article uses the critical incidents technique to showcase my digital identity negotiations between March and December 2020, the pandemic period. Critical incidents are defined as events and incidents that happen in a person's life: "They are mostly straightforward accounts of very commonplace events.… These incidents appear to be 'typical' rather than 'critical' at first sight but are rendered 'critical' through analysis" (Tripp, *Critical Incidents* 24–25). One of the significant characteristics of a critical incident is that emotions should be evoked when the author is describing the event. More importantly, as David Tripp states, by looking at a critical incident from the past, we try to understand how we might change our present ("Teachers' Lives" 69). He acknowledges that analyzing critical incidents "is an ongoing process in which new links can be constantly made" (Tripp, "Teachers' Lives" 73). While the event might be perceived as typical at first, or, according to Stephen Brookfield, unplanned and unprecedented, it becomes critical to the person through analysis and reflexive process. The critical incident technique is a two-phase process. First, the person describes and produces the incident; the explanation then follows, establishing the incident's significance (Tripp).

Flowchart of Data Presentation and Analysis

Since the start of the pandemic and quarantine measures in March 2020, I began to compile a document with my autoethnographic reflexive writings about the events and incidents from March 2020 through December 2020. These nine months were marked by the global pandemic disruption in the outer world, and my inner world had a major shift: I became pregnant with my second child.

I provide a chart depicting the data presentation and analysis chronologically to visualize the data analysis process (Figure 1).

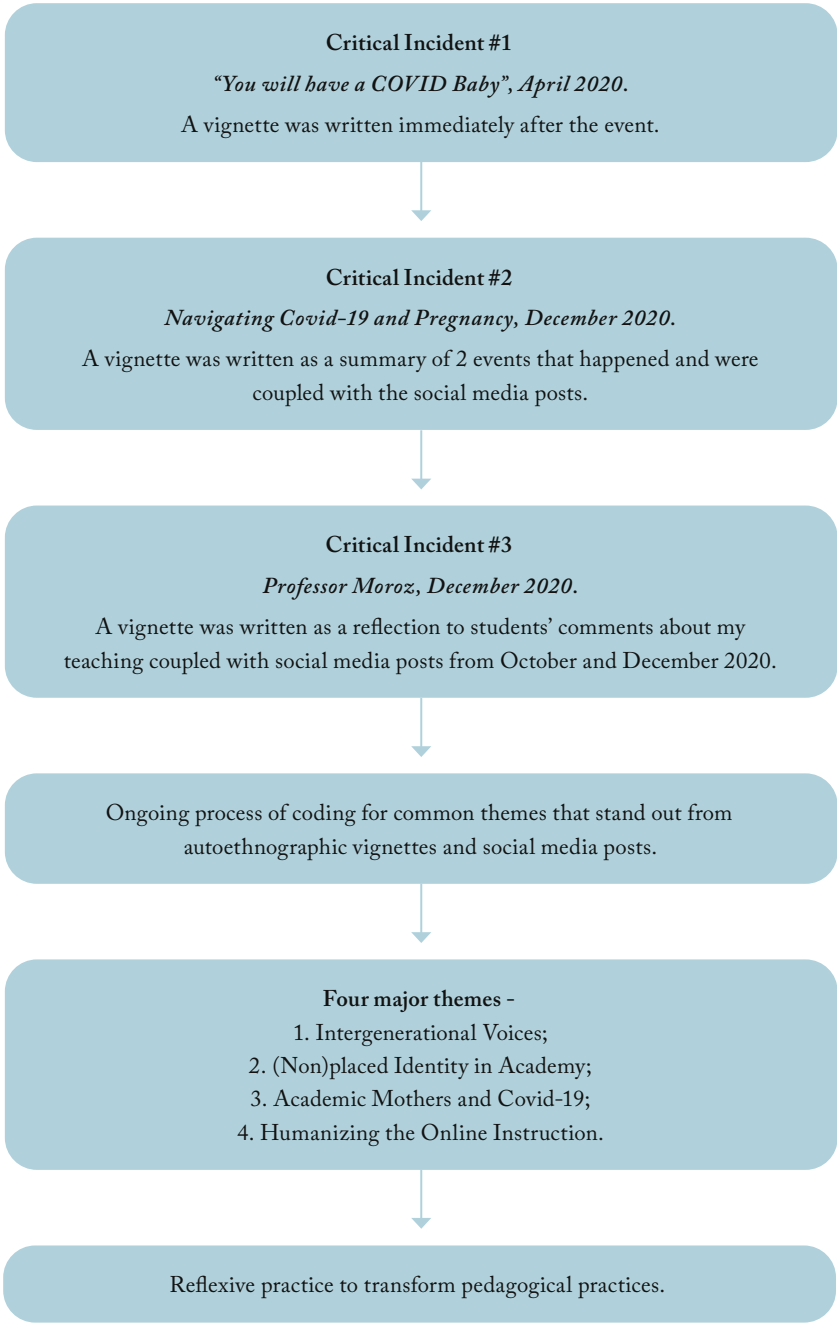

Figure 1: Data analysis process

This article examines critical incidents that led to my reflexive practices on my positioning as a mama PhD candidate during the global pandemic and later as a novice TA following a HyFlex teaching model. This method of instruction provides flexibility for students to decide whether they want in-person instruction, online instruction, or a combination of the two. Furthermore, this model aims to make both experiences equally productive for students with the help of technology.

I supplement these critical incidents with my personal social media posts, which I screenshot to add to my examination of the digital identity I portrayed during those critical moments. Next, I present those critical incidents with accompanying social media posts chronologically. Each incident has a location, the time it was written, and a title.

Critical Incidents

In this section, I discuss various critical incidents that affected my identity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"You Will Have a COVID Baby?!" Indiana, PA, April 2020

I vividly remember the facial expression of a Walmart cashier when she saw me putting a pregnancy test on the counter. Her eyes were wide open. She looked startled. It had been four weeks since the world entered quarantine because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As I was getting ready to pay for the test, the lady started a small talk.

"You will have a COVID baby?!" she burst out loud so other customers could hear it, too.

I felt embarrassed and angry, not because of my pregnancy, which I was unsure of, but because my right to be pregnant during the global pandemic was being questioned. I noticed her judgmental glare (or were my hormones acting up?). I felt angry, too, because the cashier labelled my baby as a "COVID baby." However, I pulled myself together and replied, "No, it is not a COVID baby; it was conceived before COVID happened."

I guess the lady did not even hear or care about my answer as she continued the talk by asking when the baby would be born and whether I planned to name the baby COVID or coronavirus. At that point, I quickly took my change and hurried to leave without saying a word.

Navigating COVID-19 and Pregnancy as a Novice TA, Indiana, PA, December 2020

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, I applied to be a TA at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Little did I know then how my life would change in the next nine months. Due to my status as an international student, my employment options were limited to on-campus jobs only. I knew that working as a TA

would be my family's only source of income for the next academic year. However, that prospect was not guaranteed. Due to significant cuts at the university, the department was unsure how many TA positions would be offered. When I learned I was among four people who got the positions in August, I was delighted but worried, as I was already five months pregnant with my second child. Unfortunately, at that time, I also learned that my grandmother passed away in Ukraine due to COVID-19.

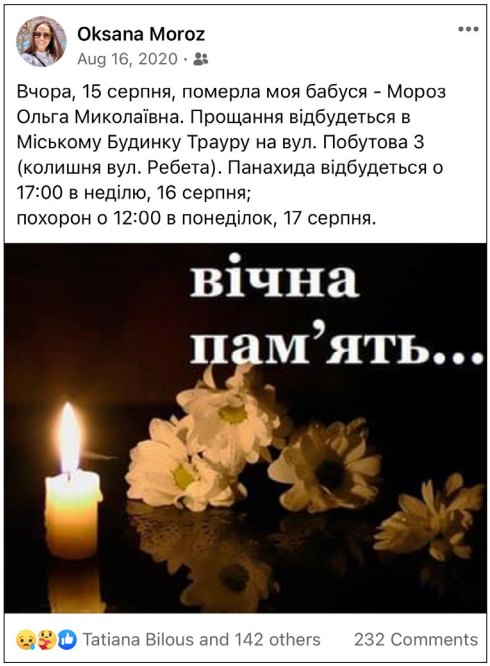

Figure 2: Facebook Post One

Note. Translation from Ukrainian to English: Yesterday, August 15, my grandmother, Moroz Olga Mykolaivna, died. A farewell will take place in the Municipal House of Mourning on Pobutova Street, 3 (formerly Rebeta Street). The memorial service will be held at 5:00 p.m. on Sunday, August 16, and the funeral at noon on Monday, August 17.

Text on the image: Memory eternal…

Just a week before the start of the Fall 2020 semester, my university announced its plan to utilize a HyFlex teaching model, which meant that only first-year students would attend face-to-face classes, while other students would be online. I was assigned to teach two sections of the Composition I course,

which meant that I had to come to face-to-face meetings twice a week and risk not only my health but also the health of my unborn child. The classes were going well, but I constantly felt scared to read weekly statistics of infected students on campus.

When the first student in my class emailed me about testing positive for COVID-19, I took the initiative and moved all classes to remote instruction around October 2020. As I started to worry about my health, and, more importantly, my due date was near, I decided to contact my department and inquired whether TAs had any benefits in case of sickness. Regrettably, I received a troubling response that vividly portrays how poorly TAs are positioned within the ivory tower's structure: "Per the Human Resources office and the Benefits Manager, teaching associates are not eligible for any benefits." Since there was no support from the university, I scheduled the entire class content ahead of time just in case my delivery did not go as planned. I was also lucky to have a supportive TA mentor willing to substitute teach for me in case I were to deliver during the time of classes.

When I think back to all the events that happened in the fall 2020 semester and the perfect timing, I think my grandmother was the one to arrange it all from above. My son was born during the Thanksgiving break, which allowed me to have some time off teaching and recover for a few days.

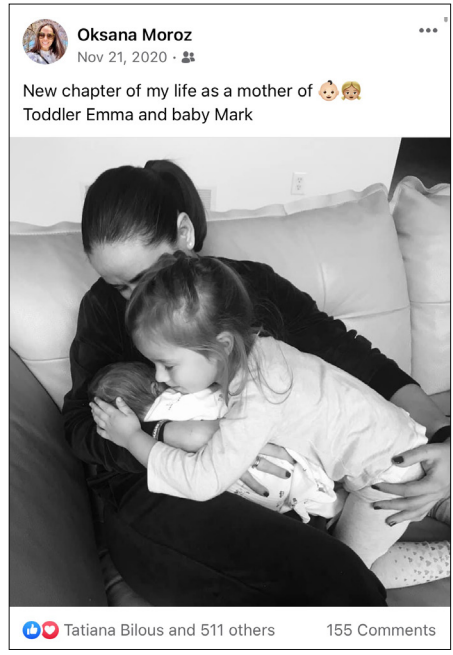

Figure 3: Facebook Post Two

Professor Moroz. Indiana, PA, December 2020

I question my career choices every single day. When I see the struggle other professors are going through to get their tenure and fight against injustices, I immediately feel that I do not want to be part of this drama. I often regret spending time still studying when my classmates back in Ukraine are government officials, business owners, and IT personnel making thousands and thousands of dollars more than I do. During these moments of self-doubt, I try to remind myself what my end goal is. It is not selfish or personal. It is instead a goal for my two kids to live better lives than what I could have given them in Ukraine. I realized that earning a PhD in humanities and applied linguistics is not about financial stability; getting me out of my comfort zone is a constant challenge, as there is nothing stable in this profession. I still try to cheer myself up by saying that what I do matters because I practice teaching what I preach in research.

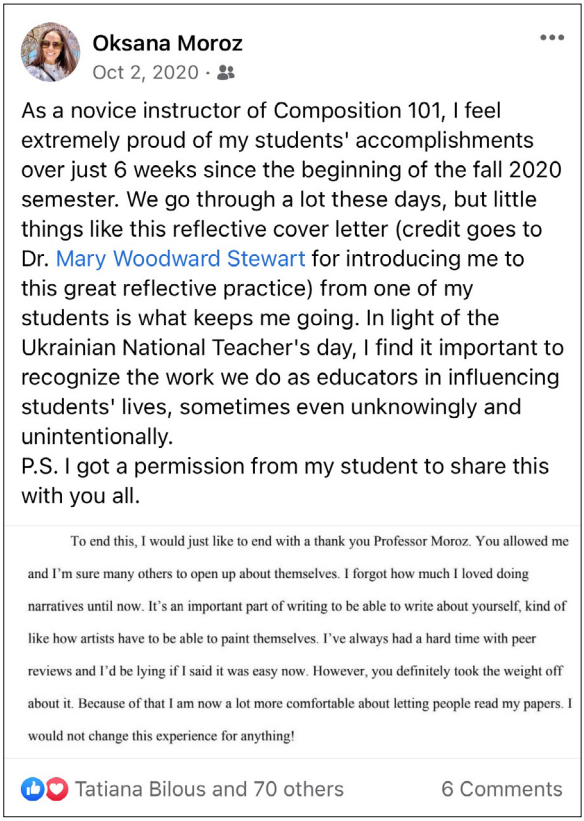

Figure 4: Facebook Post Three

In 2020, I, for the first time in my life, was addressed as a professor. I felt the respect and gratitude; it was an incredible feeling. One particular student I will remember forever. She was always sitting at the first desk, looked distracted during class, and I thought she did not care about writing at all. Her assignments were okay; she submitted everything on time but never went an extra step to reach that A level. I would point to her if somebody asked me to provide an example of a disinterested student. I was shocked to receive a reflective letter stating how she appreciated my class and my dedication to students. I had to double-check whether she indeed wrote this letter. I could not believe my eyes. This was an important learning lesson for me. "Don't judge the book by its cover," as they say, right?

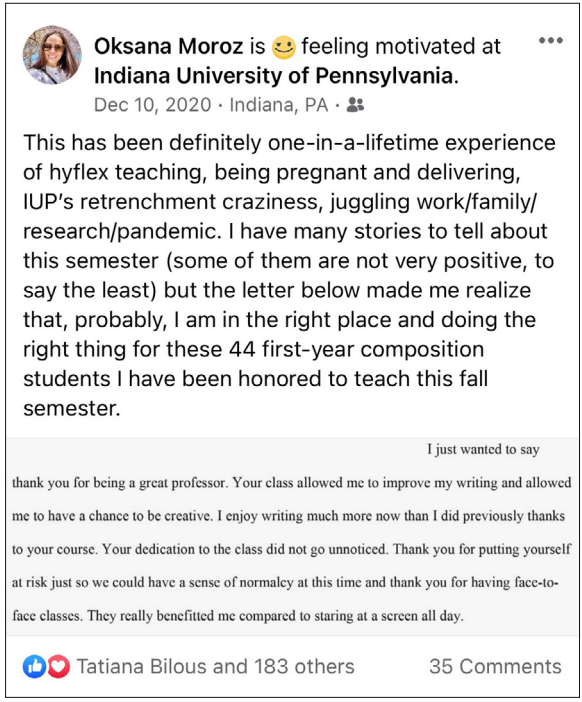

Figure 5: Facebook Post Four

Discussion and Findings

The three critical incidents described above during the pandemic present my vulnerable identity negotiation as a mother and instructor. While they seemed like smaller, insignificant events, they gained importance through my reflexive process (Cunningham). Those events were critical to me because of the meaning attached to each event and the learning experience of reliving the event and thinking critically about its further outcome. It is also evident from those critical incidents that my personal and professional lives became intertwined even more during the pandemic. The disruptive global shift to online instruction made me engage in a reflexive process to interrogate diverse experiences that affected my identity in digital and physical spaces. The critical incident technique helped me to uncover personal stories and analyze broader topics of access, gender differences, power dynamics, and issues of online instruction through my personal experiences as a mama PhD candidate and TA. In addition, my social media posts portray nuances of identity negotiation in digital spaces as they relate to incidents in my life.

Intergenerational Voices: Negotiating Three Generations of Identities during COVID-19

A major reality check occurred when my grandmother passed away in Ukraine because of COVID-19. I was broken. She raised me and played a fundamental role in shaping my personality. Unfortunately, I could not attend her funeral due to the pandemic and my pregnancy. Up to this day, I feel incredibly guilty because of that. Figure 1 presents the social media post that my father requested. I notified my friends about my grandmother's passing. This will forever be one of the most tragic experiences of my life. I blame the pandemic for this unfortunate event and my inability to travel to say the last goodbye to my grandmother. At the same time, I learned that I was hired as a TA for the next academic year. It came as a bittersweet message, since I was questioning my competency to teach during the pandemic and was anxious about my pregnancy.

The "navigating COVID-19 and pregnancy as a novice TA" vignette touches upon several themes about the pandemic's impact on my TA and mama PhD identity. In particular, the institution's course delivery mode affected my negotiation of a TA identity and greatly influenced my mother and pregnant woman identities. I had to be cautious not to get sick, but I also needed to cater to my students' needs and preferences concerning face-to-face or online delivery modes. Another critical part of this vignette showing the status of TAs in academia was the email correspondence between HR personnel and me when I inquired about possible benefits for TAs in case of illness. At that point, I was not surprised by the response. since TAs are part-time faculty, so

their academic status and benefits are limited or nonexistent. This particular vignette finishes on a brighter note, as my son was born during Thanksgiving break. The screenshot (Figure 3) of that news speaks volumes about how I positioned myself. The loss of my grandmother and pregnancy during the pandemic illuminated broader societal patterns that I made sense of using Bryan Cunningham's reflexivity framework. The critical incident technique and autoethnographic writing serve as the tools for this reflexivity, as they explore the intersections of gender, motherhood, academia, and digital spaces.

First and foremost, I am a mother of a toddler Emma and baby Mark. I now realize that my choice of this photo being black and white was significant. Since childhood, I remember my grandmother sharing her black-and-white pictures with me. In one of them, she is kissing her son and daughter, who passed away at ages five and three because of the plague, a rapidly spreading disease that had no cure then. My social media post was also a tribute to them and my grandmother. In this moment of comparison, I am reliving the intergenerational moment by connecting my grandma and her children, myself and my children, through the prism of self-reflexivity and beyond time.

The emotional responses documented in the vignettes, such as the guilt over not attending grandmother's funeral, are not just personal experiences but critical intersections where academic, familial, and gendered identities meet. This connects to Cunningham's notion that identity negotiation becomes more complex when personal events intersect with professional roles and broader cultural shifts (in my case, the pandemic). Therefore, reflexivity, captured through autoethnographic writing, illuminates the transformative process one undergoes.

(Non)placed Identity in the Academy

Being pregnant during the pandemic made me constantly rethink my position as a productive PhD candidate and a competitive TA candidate. In the vignette about having a COVID baby, the vulnerable side of myself as a pregnant mother is most apparent. It is visible through the word choice in my responses that I was reacting, experiencing an internal negotiation process, and responding emotionally to the cashier's questions and comments. My verbal responses were a product of the overall external situation—COVID-19—and my internal thoughts. I realized the situation when I decided not to share this incident with anyone. However, it made me rethink my family situation at the time of the global pandemic again and again. I was constantly afraid to disclose to anyone that I was expecting. I was worried that people would joke about the COVID baby repeatedly. I also felt scared for the future of this baby. Not only did I have to go through massive physiological changes and be cautious not to catch the virus, but I also was mentally unprepared to bear the burden of people's assumptions or judgments about my pregnancy.

I was constantly worried about the chances of this baby surviving the pandemic. I also had some complications in the middle of that pregnancy that made me go back and relive that Walmart experience and ask myself again and again whether having a baby when other people were dying was ethically correct. The last step of reflection and transformation happened when I engaged in the reflexive practice of journaling about this situation. While those thoughts were in my mind, I also acknowledged my students' diverse challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of them had concerns as to their family's health, issues with internet access, a feeling of isolation, mental health issues, financial instability, and housing problems, to name a few.

As a new mother in academia, I have reflected on my identity, particularly since reading Park's book on Asian female identity construction *(Narratives)*. My journey as a mother is ongoing, and my identity constantly evolves. While being a mother is a privilege, it can also be a source of marginalization. Some colleagues view me as less capable because of my family responsibilities. However, I feel empowered to share my personal experiences and engage with like-minded mothers-scholars through my involvement in the International Association of Maternal Action and Scholarship (IAMAS).

Academic Mothers and COVID-19

The COVID-19 outbreak revealed numerous challenges and the unpreparedness of the educational system to support student-parents. Consequently, my biggest challenge concerned my status as a mama PhD candidate. Given the shift to online learning, I felt unproductive, distracted, and unable to focus and spend time with my three-year-old daughter and five-month-old son. This also evoked a feeling of guilt. A 2014 study found that student-mothers are chronically tired due to multitasking and balancing schoolwork, family life, and job tasks (Colvert). The individuals involved in the study shared their personal experiences of feeling remorseful and worried about the welfare of their children. Furthermore, the student-mothers faced challenges due to interruptions that hampered their studying progress.

Another major challenge faced by student-parents is substantial time demand. Claire Wladis and colleagues call it a "time poverty" issue (3). According to them, students with children in preschool have a significantly limited amount of time each day for schoolwork, sleeping, eating, and leisure activities. These students only had approximately ten hours daily, much less than the twenty-one hours available to students who do not have children (Wladis et al.). "Silence and concentration are pivotal for my thinking and teaching," writes Alessandra Minello (para. 3), and I could not agree more. But I would also add writing and learning in my case. So, the question remains: How do I function productively and juggle family responsibilities, take care of my daughter and son, be present mentally with my family and friends in

Ukraine, and still complete my work duties and dissertation progress during times of crisis?

I had to accept my inability to function normally. I had to adjust to this new reality and try to make it work. After I read Anne Whitney's post on the National Council of Teachers of English blog page titled "The Gift of Offering Nothing," I started to accept my vulnerable state. Whitney uses three writing prompts in this blog post—1) Where are you and how are you? 2) What do you need, and 3) What can you give?—to help the readers interrogate their states. Whitney's post is an amalgamation of personal and professional writing that could be implemented in teaching practice to showcase the students' and instructors' identities and experiences. Even this article is a therapeutic way to reflect on my current state of mind. As for my teacher-scholar identity, the various adjustments I made because of the pandemic have shown me how I would want to be for my students—that is, a humane, understanding, and flexible instructor. Social presence is crucial in online instruction and the same goes for pandemic pedagogy and face-to-face learning in general. Therefore, Vimal Patel's advice to professors echoes my understanding of how instructors should handle their classes: "Professors need to humanize themselves. Post videos of themselves. Maybe put their cat in the videos. Talk about travel plans or a book they just read. The goal is to be approachable so that students, especially those who feel lost, become connected and comfortable reaching out if they have a problem" (para. 30). For me, instructional interactions with students helped me feel part of the community we created together as a class.

Humanizing the Online Instruction: Social Presence Is a Two-Way Responsibility

Reflecting on my identity as a novice TA during the pandemic, I think if instructors try to humanize their teaching, most problems can be minimized. "Professor Moroz" vignette showcases how I felt a disconnect from the profession but was brought back to it by the actual teaching practice. While many problems existed in the field and in trying times of pandemic instruction, there were also numerous ways to minimize their effect on student learning. For example, in the spring 2020 semester, as I started to take a hybrid pedagogy class, I realized that I expected online courses to be engaging, relevant, and productive for students. But those features might not have been appropriate for pandemic pedagogy for several reasons: access, socio-economic challenges, and family dynamics, to name a few. Webster Newbold discusses online education's advantages, such as affordability and access. Online learning theory emphasizes flexibility and inclusive education. It acknowledges that students come from diverse backgrounds and is designed to support student learning. Hence, pandemic pedagogy could benefit from implementing

productive strategies into the instructional design of online classes.

In particular, the community of inquiry framework calls for social presence as one of the three major components of successful online instruction. Randy Garrison et al. define social presence as how teachers and students "project themselves socially and emotionally, as 'real' people" (94). This is an essential realization for online instruction, pandemic pedagogy, and regular face-to-face instruction. It also emphasizes the fact that teaching and learning are about human relationships. Online learning does not (or should not) take the teacher out of that equation. When social presence is implemented, the students and instructors feel part of a community; they build relationships and belong to a group.

Regarding pandemic pedagogy, social presence can help eliminate the feeling of isolation. It is easy to feel isolated when you are stuck at home with no one to share your struggles with. For me, the IAMAS community became that circle of like-minded mother-scholars who helped me to feel included and less isolated. Therefore, instructors must build a social presence because it will lead to greater participation, motivation, and comfort within the online space.

According to Mary Stewart et al., first-year writing students reported that social comfort was greatly needed in online learning spaces. However, creating a social presence is the responsibility of students as well. They should be involved in the process and support various ways of engagement. This has been my agenda as an instructor. I emphasize social presence and community building as much as possible in every class I teach. For example, I use video greetings and audio feedback, ask students to comment on each other's posts frequently, assign group work, create projects that encourage students to connect personally, and start each class with icebreaker activities. The feedback from students demonstrates that my efforts have been helpful. As seen from Figures 3 and 4, students appreciated my approach to instruction and were grateful for being flexible and sympathetic to their struggles during the HyFlex course delivery mode.

Finally, the key issues I experienced during the pandemic, such as access and gender disparity, were not only felt then. These have always been issues in education. As I stated earlier, online learning theory can help academia minimize their effect during these trying times and on a larger scale. An efficient way to help students navigate diverse learning environments would be implementing social presence into the instructional design of all classes, despite their delivery mode. In the next section, I discuss the pedagogical implications.

Pedagogical Implications

In the following section, I discuss pedagogical implications about making the current practices more humanistic to serve students better.

The Critical Incident Technique for Humanistic Instruction

Raising awareness about my identity negotiation during the pandemic and through the critical incident technique made me understand that pedagogical and humanistic value for teaching and learning can come in various forms, from everyday experiences and in multiple spaces—whether in Walmart or on social media. Understanding students' identities should be used to inform our pedagogical practices. Moreover, the knowledge of digital identities allows us to give online education a more humanistic approach by accepting and legitimizing digital writing. Through implementing the critical incident technique, instructors give students opportunities to pick up on specific themes and emotions, identify certain assumptions, as in the case of my experiences, and reflect on those to achieve understanding. Therefore, a process to utilize the critical incident technique for humanistic instruction includes the immediate reaction of the individual, response, reflection as a way to interrogate the situation, and a realization that ultimately leads to transformation (Figure 6). I followed this process when I experienced the events mentioned above and hope that this process can enable students to reflect on their everyday past or present experiences, which might not have seemed significant at that moment. Still, thinking and writing about the events brings value and connects current and future trajectories.

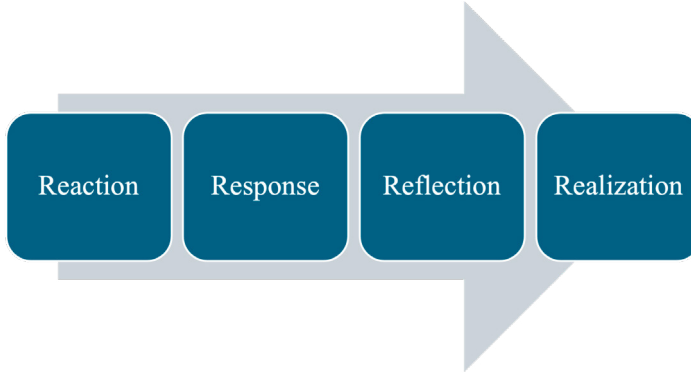

Figure 6: Critical Incident Technique Process

Creative Writing as Empowering

By exemplifying that creative personal writing is authentic, I argue that it should be practised in teacher education and English composition classes. It is a way to engage in a reflexive practice and interrogate one's digital identity. Moreover, autoethnographic writing is a productive methodological approach that enables scholars to legitimize their personal experiences for diverse audiences. Furthermore, autobiographical writing can enhance and prepare writers to write in other genres (Ellis and Bochner; Canagarajah). Finally, inquiring into one's digital identity negotiation through writing poses rhetorical implications worth investigating.

Furthermore, autobiographical writing allows for resolving personal and social dilemmas (Canagarajah). In an online course, autoethnographic writing is vital in community building. With the help of such writing, students can share their personal views and engage in peer review to get to know each other better. As to social presence, autoethnographic writing can help "to create a level of comfort in which people feel at ease around the instructor and the other participants" (Aragon 60). This engagement helps eliminate the feeling of isolation often reported by students who take online or asynchronous classes. Personal communication, feedback from peers and instructors, and nonacademic communication, such as WhatsApp or Snapchat groups, help students build a sense of community and eradicate loneliness.

Digital Identity as Pedagogy

We bring our identities to the classroom as teachers, students, and individuals. These identities shape our pedagogical choices and inform our teaching practices. Brian Morgan explains that the concept of identity in pedagogy allows teachers to treat their identities as valuable pedagogical resources. Suppose we cultivate an identity-as-pedagogy frame in teacher education programs and teach preservice teacher candidates about identity. In that case, we can help them make informed pedagogical choices in their future classes. This resonates with Suhanthie Motha et al., who explore how teachers' identities intersect with their pedagogical practices and focus on how life histories and identities inform teaching. They also highlight how multilingual teachers can draw on our identities or lived experiences as resources to guide our teaching practices. For Motha et al., "Our teaching practices are informed by our life histories and our identities impact our pedagogies" (14). In addition, Park emphasizes the following: "Women's experiences need to be understood not only at the institutional level but also at the personal level. Women's familial experiences are conditioned by the social and familial structure and related to their gendered desire" (*Narratives* 45). Therefore, female identities should be researched and problematized in the academic field. There is still a need to investigate mothering in academia, including workload, time, financial

variables, and power dynamics. Moreover, I would like to expand and further the conversation by including the digital aspect of our identity construction, since the lines between physical and virtual are blurred in the postdigital era. Consequently, by writing this article investigating my digital identity, I urge other teachers and students to reflect on their experiences and use them as a pedagogical tool to inform their teaching and learning.

Concluding Remarks

> "People shouldn't have to choose between pursuing a graduate education and having a family."
>
> —Rachel Sandalow-Ash

I have opened up about my experiences as a mama PhD candidate and TA during the COVID-19 pandemic. The critical incident technique was used to collect and engage in the reflexive process on three autoethnographic vignettes and social media posts. My experiences, though unique, are part of a larger pool of challenges that those with similar identities faced during the pandemic. I position myself as a reflexive teacher-scholar by engaging in autoethnographic writing, providing details of each incident coupled with a social media post written during the same period. After critically examining my described experiences, I can see how my identities are situated within the larger academic discourses. I agree with Canagarajah, who emphasizes autoethnography's ability to "articulate one's own experiences, rather than letting others represent them" (*Transnational* 262). The voices of underrepresented or marginalized populations must be heard even more so during the global pandemic.

Including social media posts as part of autoethnographic data is integral to one's digital identity portrayal. In addition, social media opens numerous paths for analyses of social interactions and participant reflections. Finally, the pandemic forced instructors to look for alternative pedagogical decisions for engaging students online. As Stewart et al. rightly point out, social presence must be a context-specific endeavour, modified according to a specific discipline and population. For me, autoethnographic writing became a way to engage students in creating and maintaining a social presence in the online learning environment. Autoethnographic writing is therapeutic, and the pandemic showed us that we need that therapy. One of the practical ways to introduce autoethnographic essays into the class is to promote the importance of students' experiences and validate and endorse those experiences as unique, powerful, and legitimate. Students can write about personal experiences and share them with their peers and instructors for feedback. This process involves all stages of writing, such as drafting, revising, and giving feedback, but it also engages students in metacognitive and critical thinking.

At the time of this writing, I am a mama PhD candidate who constantly negotiates multiple identities in and beyond the academic setting. However, I am first and foremost a mother to two children: four-year-old Emma and fourteen-month-old Mark. I am a transnational, multilingual scholar from Ukraine with a resident-alien status in the United States. I still post on social media from time to time and engage in autoethnographic writing. However, I am not a TA or an instructor. Because of my university's retrenchment process in the spring of 2021, I can no longer be hired as a TA or work elsewhere due to the restrictions of the international student visa. As a mother in academia, I face challenges every day. However, I find comfort in sharing my experiences via social media in groups like Mama PhD or Academic Mothers. I write in my digital journal about moments that happen weekly to react to the moment, respond in my words to the situation, and reflect on the possible outcomes to envision how it can transform my future.

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