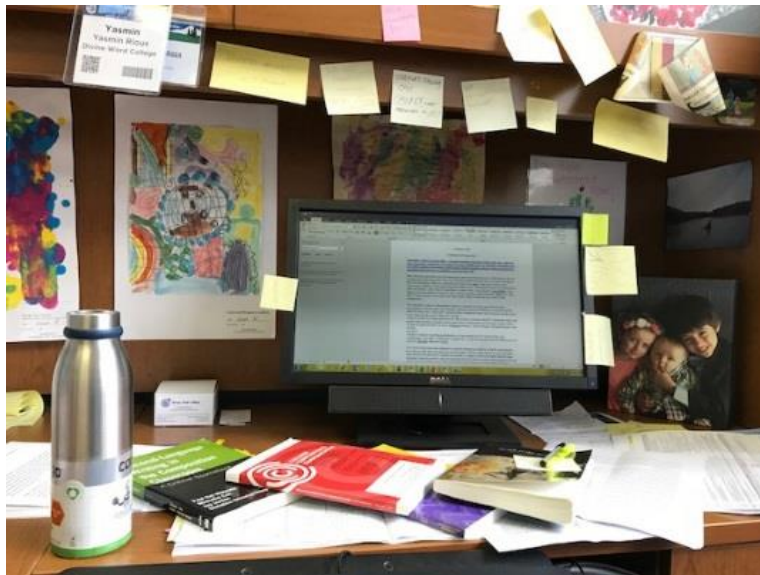


## Composing Compassion

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**Figure: The Author's Desk.**

Sometimes, when I sit in my office and type away at a manuscript, feeling the iron hands of pressure pushing down on my shoulders, stretching once in a while to improve my breathing and posture, and forget things and lives that exist out there beyond my desk. I look up or down but at nothing with intention or mindfulness and question it all.

Piles of books and articles cover my desk area and my keyboard must be suffocating in the sea of sticky notes that surrounds it. The screen itself is an ornament holder for more notes,

reminders, and things that I can absolutely, under no circumstances forget! One reads, “Order more sticky notes.”

I type and fill my mind with things that matter to me: multilingual writers, ecocomposition, place and identity, place-based composition, to name a few. I am grateful. I am fulfilled. I am happy to have the ability to spend my days writing, teaching, and researching. There is no other job I would want to pursue, nor is there any other field I would like to dedicate my words to than composition.

Yet, sometimes, when I read guidelines and try to squeeze my brain and self into these prescriptions; when the dates of upcoming conference proposal deadlines are looming, and the stack of sticky noted “must read,” unread articles relentlessly stare at me from across the room, I can’t help but ask myself, “What am I doing?” I start to wonder how I am helping anyone or how I am doing anything remotely important to anyone but myself.

My presence in front of this PC, behind this desk, glued to this keyboard certainly seems rather passive and pointless to the larger context where we hear of chemical attacks in Syria, Rohingya refugees, climate change, immigration laws, and so forth. I am here. Trying to compose something publishable so I can populate my CV and hope to contribute something to my field! A field that I certainly love. I chose it long ago and still find joy in it as I used to. But still: What am I doing?

I push myself away from my desk to change my perspective. Some student drawings, paintings, and other creative parts of past multi-genre assignments adorn my shelves. A stack of sticky note titled “must keep” student essays lightens the room when I think of the experiences

behind the pages. I think of the chair on the other side of my desk and how many wonderful conferences I have held with my writing students and how our words and exchanges have led to great writing.

When I question the purpose of everything because I feel useless behind my desk where my cold PC stares back at me without meaning, I remember what drew me to my field in the first place and what has happened since. I use what the teaching and learning of composition have taught me: to connect with others through compassion. The kind of inter-human compassion that asks us to take care of one another. The love that calls us to see our human interconnectedness and the need to support each other. Composition does not end at my desk, or PC, or chair, or with my writing students' artifacts or essays. For me, composition runs through everything and connects my life to itself.

Outside of my office and classrooms, I compose texts to navigate difficult legal situations I gladly placed myself in when my husband and I decided to become legal guardians for two Guatemalan minors who might, without this guardianship, face deportation. In my exchanges with social workers and lawyers, I write clearly and concisely. I focus on remaining objective, even if my emotions course through my hands. I try not to use long sentences that I am accustomed to because of my German upbringing and education. I revise for passive voice, which attracts me. I reread and rewrite a seven-sentence email over and over and over again until its meaning blurs alongside its font. I read my messages out loud, change the first sentences several times, change the ending, maybe start all over. I tell my students, "You'll have to revise outside of the classroom, too." I wish they could see me writing my legal emails!

My years with composition have also taught me to be an investigator with deliberate research capabilities. With my skills running through my fingertips, I found a social worker at a refugee camp in Greece, the first place of physical contact that most Syrian refugees make with Europe. I don't speak Greek, and English is not my first language, but composition offered me a background with multilingual writers. This knowledge, coupled with my own experience with writing in English as an L2 learner, allows the communication between the social worker and me to run smoothly and effectively. She tells me what the local children need, and I continue using my field's gifts to make it work.

I write descriptions and updates for a GoFundMe site so I can raise money for the Syrian refugee children. The text needs to be far-reaching, engaging, and hopeful. My audience needs to feel like they can make a change and become part of something that will help these children. The exigency feels quite different from some of my common writing activities. And more real, too. The well-being, safety, and even survival of vulnerable human beings is at stake here, which is not something I can say about my other common other writing activities (faculty or student emails, committee work, etc.).

To me, composition has always had a strong human focus and has, therefore, been associated with a certain responsibility towards others. It asks us to navigate the lives and meanings of others by its need to explore rhetorical spheres and understand varying contexts in which we need to place ourselves. This wide-reaching concept and scope of Composition that goes beyond ourselves resonates with compassion, the desire or requirement to see things from another perspective. Writing often involves someone to write to, and at times this person,

situation, or entity can only be reached and affected by our written words. We can make our intentions move carefully and deliberately across a sheet of paper, a screen, or other medium that will reach whoever needs to be addressed.

These skills comprise the extension of what my field has equipped me with. I use what composition has given me to foster compassion in my classrooms and beyond. I can teach and write and love every day that I am involved in composition. I am still ecstatic when a student reaches a point in their writing that changes everything for them, when a world opens up because of writing. I can participate in the joy a student feels when they have composed “their best piece yet,” or when we, as a class, co-construct meaning by exploring a topic.

So sometimes, when I hear that questioning voice responding to some terrible news that comes across my screens in a quiet and haunting manner, I take my writing and all it means and try to make little efforts toward creating a more compassionate world.