

A Message from the Editors

Vanessa Arnold, Pia Benthin, Ella Ernst, Peter Hintz, Leonie Hirschmann, Solina Jean-Louis, Solveig Kloss, Josette Marsh, Christoph Friedrich Nostitz, Laura Michelle Pröger, George Rainov, Nino Taubmann, Danson Wolfe
Leipzig University, Germany

As the editors of *aspeers*, the end of the fourteenth issue's cycle presented us with a moment of reflection. We put the finishing touches on it roughly one year after the COVID-19 pandemic began in Europe, and while we knew these circumstances certainly had an impact on the issue, we were left to wonder whether they would define it. Our workshops, meetings, and article discussions were conducted entirely online, which added the Zoom-mosaic aesthetic to our experience, but seemed to have little effect on the quality of work we would be able to produce. Collaborating with each other and our supervising instructors provided a safe workspace, and while most of us luckily avoided infection, none of us went without the pandemic touching someone we cared for. Those of us who worked in the 'outside world,' or lived with those who did, lacked that full-time security, and we worried when an instructor or fellow student notified us they wouldn't be able to make a meeting. The professorial voice, a tradition in previous issues of *aspeers*, fell through this year after correspondence with various scholars was interrupted by these same extenuating circumstances. Because of this, we would like to extend a tremendous amount of gratitude to the scholars, instructors, and administrators who made this year's issue possible, despite it all.

Our perspective was limited by our experience, however, and the true impact of the crisis will remain largely invisible to us. While many academics have the relative privilege of being able to work from home and may thus avoid the drastic consequences of contracting COVID-19 at work, they have still had to respond to an ever-shifting landscape of challenges at universities, from the transition to remote teaching to the loss of access to research resources. The articles submitted this year

are products of strenuous effort, and many scholars have lost vital opportunities to further their research as libraries and archives sit shuttered. Furthermore, shifts in household labor, childcare, eldercare, and physical confinement have increased faculty's mental health needs and reduced the time available to perform their core functions of teaching and research (Flaherty). At the same time, according to a 2020 report from the University of Reading, many academics believe they are exhibiting the same dedication to their job and the same tendencies to work long hours, even during the pandemic; as a result, some have struggled to maintain levels of mental resilience and energy (Walker et al.). Both faculty and students may have lacked access to laptops or to a stable Internet connection, while others may have experienced housing insecurity, grappled with the sudden loss of a job, or met mental, physical, social, and economic impacts in other forms ("Student Wellness"). Pandemic-related isolation, anxiety, and uncertainty led to more than fifty percent of British university students reporting that their mental health had worsened during the fall semester of 2020 ("Coronavirus"). Still others became stranded as countries closed their borders, with international students in the difficult position of choosing between returning to their loved ones at home or continuing their studies (Jayadeva).

Accepting such hardships may permit us to realize that perhaps things are not quite so dire. Institutions, faculty, and students molded themselves to this new learning style on the fly. Even in an unprecedented global health crisis, learning still happened: Lesson plans were adapted and links were sent. Pages were read, and discussions moved to Zoom Breakout Rooms. Furthermore, with mobility becoming a virtual characteristic, new students may have entered the fray. People with disabilities were able to participate in ways that are often difficult in a physical lecture hall (James). Some were able to learn from home while attending to loved ones, or joined class discussions from rural locations that would have previously inhibited their access to higher education (Renes). This forced digital migration may prove to be the impetus that finally expands our understanding of what higher education can be and how it can become a more inclusive environment, whether between walls or on a server.

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