

ENGAGING BEHIND THE MASK



By Jennifer Collar

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Abstract: Instructors teaching during this unprecedented time in history must find ways of engaging students from behind the mask. As a result of the pandemic, my colleagues and I have discovered that students do not respond or participate in the ways they once did. In the classroom, students have become silent spectators, hiding behind the mask, making it a challenge for instructors to engage and for students to be successful. We have struggled mightily to overcome this challenge of engaging students who are in the midst of pandemic survival. This article explores some useful classroom strategies that can be utilized to engage the “pandemic student.” It is only through persistence and dedication to student engagement that instructors will be able to reach students in this “new normal” of education. Instructors may have to put to rest old strategies (or at least revamp them) and find new tools and activities to employ to reach behind the barrier of the mask worn by the “pandemic student.”

Key Words: engagement, student success, strategies, COVID-19 pandemic, technology

Every morning as my children and I embark on our daily journey to school, I issue the reminder to “mask up.” Over the last six months, this kind reminder has morphed into as mundane a part of our routine as ensuring backpacks and lunch boxes have been collected. The first morning we returned to school from our desperately needed two-week Christmas hiatus, I followed my mask mandate with one last glance behind me to verify all three

of my kids were indeed “masked up.” My youngest son immediately recognized the look as a mask inspection, and he asked, “Mom, will this pandemic ever end?” Sighing deeply, I responded with assertive reassurance that because we now have a vaccine, we are most certainly headed towards herd immunity. With a smile of utmost confidence, I assured him that life would eventually return to “normal” and that the days of the “new normal” would be far behind us soon enough. Sadly, my son, sharing the same forlorn sigh, responded with, “I wish, but I think you are wrong.”

My son’s fears and frustrations of what he perceives as a never-ceasing pandemic are representative of the level of despondency that the pandemic has pressed upon our youth. Recent research indicates that there is a clear correlation between the resulting isolation of the pandemic and the mental health of school children. One study in England indicated a “sample of 2,673 parents recruited through social media had reported deteriorating mental health and increased behavioural problems among children aged 4 to 11 years between March and May 2020 (during lockdown)” (as cited in “Warning Over Effects,” 2021, p. 21). Older students are also suffering mental and emotional consequences of the pandemic. One particularly interesting study that investigated the impacts of mental health on first-year university students reported that “rates of moderate-severe anxiety increased 39.8 percent and rates of moderate-severe depression increased 47.9 percent from before to mid-pandemic” (Fruehwirth et al., 2021, p. 11). Also noteworthy, according to Fruehwirth et al. (2021), is that “these changes were not driven by increasing trends in anxiety and depression symptoms resulting from typical first year stressors prior to the pandemic. With one-quarter of students experiencing moderate-severe anxiety and nearly one-third experiencing moderate-severe depression four months into the pandemic” (p. 11). These students find themselves caught in a state of hopeless anxiety and despair,

filled with doubts that “this” will ever end. As educators, I think that we, too, find ourselves wondering when we will see the end, and although we may be optimistic that a ray of hope has now emerged with dispersal of a vaccine, the future remains uncertain. Our students, like my son and like so many of us, find themselves submerged in this abyss of uncertainty, and this uncertainty is manifested in the classroom. It becomes apparent, not necessarily in the words of students or even their actions, but rather by their lack of words and actions.

Hiding Behind the Mask

Upon returning to the community college classroom last fall where I teach composition and literature courses, my colleagues and I immediately observed a remarkable disengagement of our students. A mere few weeks into the fall semester, I was completely overwhelmed by my quiet students, garbed in masks of stillness and silence, and of course, the literal masks that covered their faces. My students played ostrich, heads in the sand, convinced, I am almost certain, that because they wore masks, I could not see them! Hidden behind the masks and distanced from one another (a literal six feet between each of them), they sat largely unresponsive. In my sixteen years of teaching English, I have never observed the level

expert in the art of pandemic instruction, but I do think I have developed a few useful strategies from which others might benefit. Before we can begin a discussion of effective strategies to engage students who are hiding behind the masks, though, we must first recognize that we are dealing with a new kind of student. No, I am not speaking about the new-age, technology-driven students for whom we have been actively turning cartwheels over the last fifteen or so years. What I am referencing is the “pandemic student.” The “pandemic student” is a student who has had work hours cut or lost a job because of quarantine complications or budget constraints. The “pandemic student” is a student who has lost a relative to COVID-19. A “pandemic student” is a COVID-19 survivor, one who has been quarantined more times than he can count and who has known the loneliness of complete isolation. Or perhaps a “pandemic student” is simply like my son, a student who has been so jaded by the events and duration of this pandemic that he finds himself in a hopeless state of pessimism, wondering if “this” will ever reach an end. These “pandemic students” are the new kind of student who we as instructors must find a way to engage. We must discover effective tactics to pull them from behind the masks to engage them in the classroom. There are three ways in which I believe we can effectively reach the “pandemic student” who hides behind the mask.



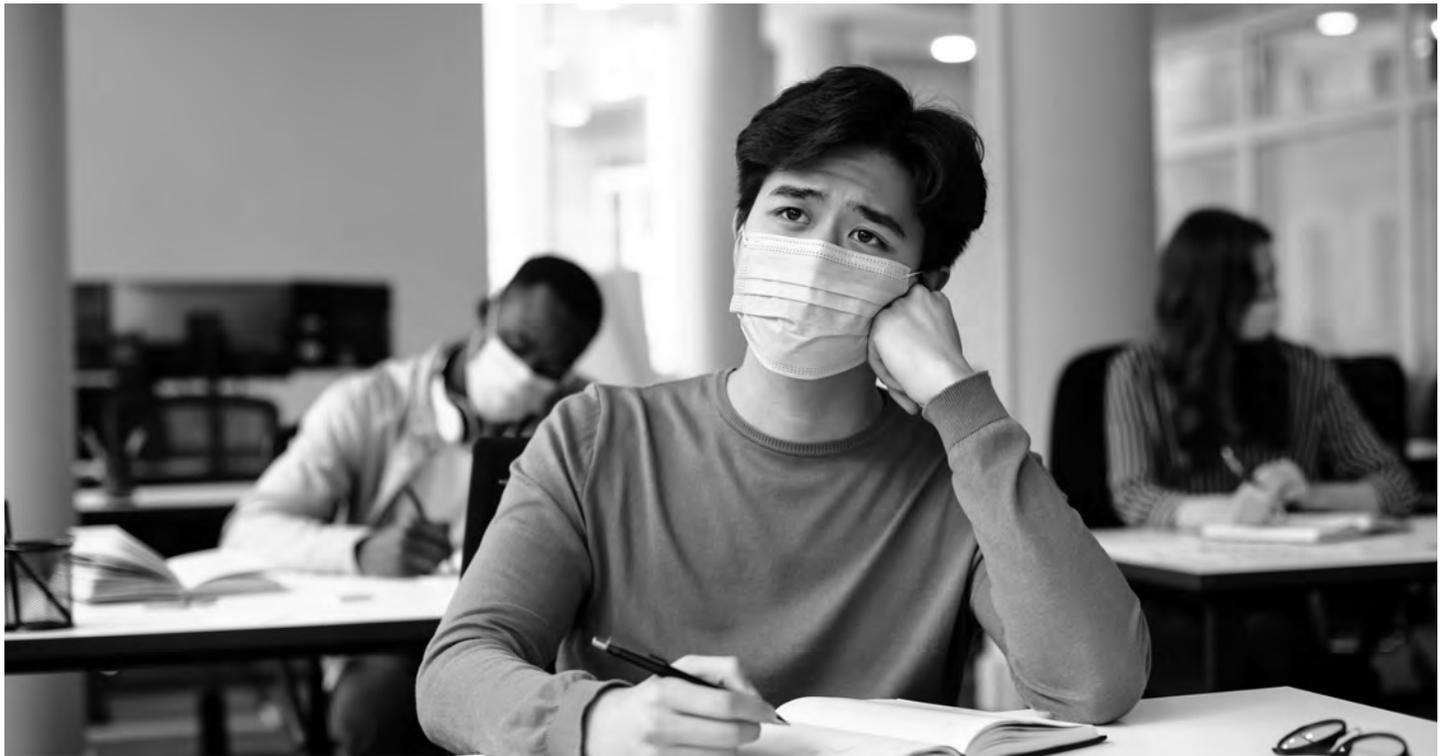
of disengagement I encountered in the fall of 2020. When posing questions, I received no responses, at least not voluntary ones, but instead was met with silent eyes.

I quickly realized that to reach these students, new strategies would have to be utilized. By no means do I consider myself an

Strategies for Pandemic Teaching

Promoting Discussion

First, we need to get them talking again. Sounds easy enough, right? But again, we are not contending with the typical student; these



“pandemic students” are hiding behind the masks, thinking they are invisible. What can we do to show them they are not? Well, there is always the age-old practice of calling on them by name. Admittedly, I tried this strategy in my composition classes, and while I almost always received a response, it was terse, and very clearly surrendered only under duress. So, what have I found to be effective? Technology. I have always relied on technology in the classroom, but I am finding the usage of it now is more crucial than ever. Two of the tools I have found to improve student engagement, particularly with “pandemic students,” are Kahoot and Padlet.

Kahoot is a tool that allows the user to generate quizzes that are projected onto a screen. Responses are timed, and students receive points for accuracy and speed. Let me make clear that my intention of using Kahoot in the scope of the pandemic has been to increase student engagement (particularly with their classmates), not primarily to assess their knowledge. The key to successfully using Kahoot for this particular goal is to present Kahoot quizzes as extra credit activities in which the top winners are awarded extra credit points of some kind. Establishing the Kahoot as extra credit creates a low-stress environment in which students feel comfortable and encouraged to just have fun because the stakes are low. Although the stakes are low, students quickly become competitive in the game, and this competitive drive sparks...yes, conversation! They finally begin to converse with one another, to verbally express their successes and failures in the game. Kahoot becomes the springboard for discussion. Because they are now talking, I use the questions from the Kahoot (and they are usually short—no more than ten questions) as a discussion platform, pausing between questions to discuss the questions and their responses. The questions formulated for Kahoot are usually meant to recall simple, basic information. However, if instructors can utilize this tool to put students at ease, they can take the simple questions and use them as a basis to dive into more complex ones. For example, my dual credit students read the novel *Frankenstein* this past semester, and so I created a Kahoot to “quiz” them over their

reading. One question asked students what one aspect of the “creature” was found most appalling by his creator. While the answer to this question is as simple as “his eyes,” we were able to pause the Kahoot and delve into a discussion of why this feature bothered the protagonist, which launched into an even heavier discussion of his motivation for manufacturing the creature in the first place and why the protagonist ultimately rejects his creation. This simple technology tool has proven a savior to promote discussion in the silent pandemic classroom.

Padlet is another teaching tool that has proven immensely helpful this semester in pulling students from behind their masks into classroom discussion. Padlet is a teaching tool that acts as an interactive “chalkboard,” allowing students to view information written on the board and also post responses with a click of the finger or computer mouse. While they are often reluctant to speak out loud, even in pre-COVID times, I have found that students are willing to share ideas via text, and Padlet provides a platform for this type of response. For example, I recently employed Padlet to ignite discussion about symbolism in Robert Frost’s poetry. Each student was asked to post an example of symbolism from the poems “Acquainted With the Night” and “Fire and Ice.” After allowing students about five minutes to formulate responses, we went through each response posted to the Padlet, and I asked students to explain their responses. Before I asked for an explanation, though, I attempted to boost students’ confidence by stating a few encouraging words about each post, pointing out the insightfulness or intrigue of the response. Once a response has been praised, students are typically eager to claim ownership of it and engage in the discussion. Again, Padlet is a tool that can effectively engage discussion in almost any classroom situation and a valuable teaching tactic I will continue to utilize even as we move into post-pandemic days.

Forming Human Connections

While Kahoot works quite well to promote discussion, I have found

another key component to engagement of “pandemic students” is to connect with students on a human level. We must show students that we are human; we are like them. One of the most effective ways of going about this objective is to make them laugh. In one valuable study that looked at the role of laughter therapy in preventing behavioral problems, Mahmoudi (2015) explained, “Laughing and humor are positive methods for expressing feelings and pleasant emotions, and it has a very positive impact on our mind and soul” (p. 81). This study demonstrates the ability of laughter to help people better cope with physical pain and mental anguish. Unfortunately, provoking laughter is not a natural talent for me. Often pegged a “Hermione,” my instructional methods tend to be more serious and business-like. However, the “pandemic student” does not respond well to overly serious and business-like. These students thrive in a more laid-back, informal, and even comical environment. Because joking is not my strong suit, I have had to work on this approach, but I do find cracking a few jokes does indeed lighten the mood and put students at ease. Sharing of funny quotes with students is also an effective strategy that helps compensate for my natural lack of joke-telling skills. For example, on the first day of class this spring, I shared a quote by Homer Simpson: “English? What do I need to learn English for? I’m not going to England.” Students appreciated seeing a familiar character and were preparing to laugh before they had even finished the quote. This humorous quote leveraged our discussion of the purpose of a college composition course, so two things were accomplished: the ice was broken, which then allowed for a meaningful discussion.

Another way of forming a human connection with students is to share anecdotal stories. My students love to hear stories about my kids and my personal adventures. While I have always shared these types of narratives, I find myself doing it with more frequency. It takes only a few minutes to share a story at the beginning of class (preferably one that can be connected to the course content, but not always). For example, when covering the research paper assignment last fall, I shared (ashamedly) the story of my twelve-year-old who copied and pasted a paper from the Internet and then bragged about it to his mother, the English teacher (as you can imagine, this situation did not end well for him). This story fit perfectly with our discussion of plagiarism and the potential consequences of plagiarism. Establishing a personable demeanor with students, telling the occasional joke, and sharing a personal narrative are always good practices in the classroom, but they have proven vital in the successful engagement of “pandemic students.”

Motivating Students

A final strategy of “pandemic student” engagement, and likely the most difficult one for all of us, is to help students care. If we cannot motivate students to care about what they are doing in the classroom, then all of the above measures are moot. Once again, we are encountering students who exist in various states of pandemic despair, and they do not necessarily want to be disturbed from their hiding places behind the masks. How do we encourage the dejected and uncertain “pandemic student” to care? Well, I am still working on this one, but I do my best first of all to show students that I care about their success. Notice, I say “show” and not “say.” It is important that the actions of teachers show that we care about student success. Showing care means reaching out to students, contacting them with a personal card or phone call when they miss class. It means offering second chances when they miss a deadline. It means sending them reminders. Basically, it means establishing a presence so they know that their teacher is there to help them succeed; they must understand that they are

not in it alone. Next, I do my best to demonstrate the relevance of their work in composition courses. We investigate many careers that use writing on a daily basis (almost any career requires solid communication skills). Throughout the semester, I continually reiterate the importance of what they are doing in the composition classroom and how they will use the acquired skills in “real life.” “Pandemic students” need to see the future, and because they are not necessarily looking to the future right now, it is their teacher’s job to present it to them.

Teaching Behind the Mask

While these strategies aim to increase “pandemic student engagement,” I must also mention that many instructors may also find themselves in the “hiding behind the mask” state. We are not exempt from the disheartening effects of this pandemic and may also find ourselves enveloped with dismal thoughts of the future. Admittedly, this may not be an easy task, but a conscious effort must be made to bring ourselves from behind the mask (not literally—we must leave the mask in place) if we are to reach and engage our students from behind their masks.

Again, while I do not profess to be an expert in pandemic teaching, I have quickly learned to adapt and re-employ some old strategies, while directing them to new purposes, and I have observed an improvement in “pandemic student” engagement. Certainly, we have a grueling battle still left before us in this fight against COVID, and we must forge paths for student (and self) engagement and success in the classroom. With determination, flexibility, and perhaps a little bit of humor, we can engage them behind the masks.

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