OVERCOMING CHALLENGES OF THE POST-PANDEMIC COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

By Jennifer Collar

Jennifer Collar is the Division Director of Fine Arts and Communications as well as an Instructor of English at Paris Junior College in Paris, Texas. Her research interests include dual credit, college readiness, and developmental education in Texas. She can be reached at jcollar@parisjc.edu.

Abstract

Composition instructors must contend with and rise above the challenges that now exist in the post-pandemic college composition classroom. Students today are not the same types of students who filled classrooms prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. This article discusses post-pandemic challenges in college composition classrooms and aims to equip educators with useful strategies and best practices to address those challenges. Two areas of focus are related to practices that will enhance students' social and writing skills. Rather than continuing to hope for a return to the *normalcy* of the pre-COVID-19 classroom, composition instructors must exhibit flexibility and aim to implement social and reflective writing practices to engage students in the new normal.

Keywords: pandemic, composition, writing, strategies, mental health

In the latter months of 2020 and into 2021, educators across our state and country grappled with the seemingly impossible feat of transitioning students back into the classroom following the COVID-19 *stay-at-home* orders. Eagerly and anxiously, we waited for the announcement that in-person learning would resume; we hoped that perhaps we would be able to put the pandemic in our past and resume education as it had previously existed. However, educators across K-12 and higher education quickly discerned that the mode of education prior to the pandemic was a past relic, and the smooth transition we had so hoped for was not the actuality of our situation. While the return to the classroom brought challenges to all educators, it is important to understand that pandemic learning had a significant impact not only on the young learners in public education, but also on those students enrolled in higher education. The return to the college classroom brought with it a *new* kind of student college educators had not anticipated.

This new kind of student was a student greatly impacted by the isolation and complications of online learning. One of the most significant challenges encountered by college composition instructors with the return of the in-person learning environment was a marked decrease in the communications skills of students, in both oral and written communication. While I had an understanding that students encountered isolation during the pandemic, I did not fully grasp the extent of the impacts of this remoteness. Teaching college composition to students who struggled to communicate seemed an insurmountable task; however, as an educator, it was my desire and duty to adapt to the waves of change, to use this transformation as an opportunity for learning and growth.

When students returned to the campus of my northeast Texas community college in September of 2020, they found themselves displaced in a new world full of unfamiliar rules and painstaking protocols of mask wearing, completion of medical questionnaires, and even temperature screenings. Instructors, too, were required to follow these same protocols prior to joining the classroom. Students were greeted not by smiles of their instructor and classmates, but by seemingly emotionless faces donning masks. Students were expected to sit six feet apart, while instructors stood protected behind plexiglass shields. Although well-intended, these protocols and social distancing rules contributed to the isolation and declining socialization that students had already experienced during the lockdown.

While I initially attempted to surmount the challenges of the pandemic classroom by drawing on pre-pandemic teaching practices, I soon realized that I had a great deal to learn in reaching these post-pandemic students. I needed to use new practices teaching students who had been impacted by the isolation of at-home learning to a much greater extent than I had initially realized.

Challenges and Solutions in the Post-Pandemic Composition Classroom

Pandemic Impact: Socialization

One lingering and paramount challenge in my post-pandemic composition classroom has been the decline in student social skills. During the nationwide shutdowns, students were expected to adapt swiftly to the world of at-home—replete with online learning systems facilitated by learning management systems and other virtual classroom settings. Learning to work in isolation on their computers, if they were fortunate enough to have a computer with internet access, many students became passive sponges of information, watching our instructional videos and completing posted online assignments.

One result of operating in an environment of isolation and lack of true socialization was the rise of mental health issues. In a research study conducted by Suh et al. (2022), 438 college teachers responded to a survey about their experiences with students during online pandemic teaching. These teachers "frequently described their students using phrases such as 'stressed, depressed, and isolated,' and they recognized the impact on students' ability to learn" (p. 54). One critical point to note is that "many university students experience mental health challenges in non-pandemic years" (Knickerbocker et. al, 2022, p. 2). It must be understood, then, that college students were already a population at high risk for mental health complications, and as we pull out of the pandemic era, mental health issues of college students should be of even greater concern for educators.

In addition to reporting mental health concerns, the surveyed teachers reported that their teaching effectiveness decreased during this time of online learning, with teachers engaging in little interaction with students. One instructor describing the ineffectiveness of the online environment explained, "It's hard to funnel a ton of energy into blank screens with no feedback. … It's hard to watch them not getting the material" (Suh et. al., 2022, p. 55).

While the challenge of the online environment is acknowledged in this research, it was not all negative. Hews et al. (2022) investigated students' experiences with online discussion forums during the pandemic shut down. "While transition to a new digital environment was generally challenging, participants who described themselves as quiet, shy, or introverted, those typically less vocal during in-person classes on campus, reported it was easier to participate in online classes where they were somewhat anonymous and felt more comfortable" (p. 134).

Other positives were gleaned from at-home learning, as educators discovered some creative ways of reviving students' voices in the post-pandemic classroom. In investigating lessons learned by college instructors through pandemic teaching, Andrews and Green (2021) explain that "there are effective strategies that instructors can use to learn about students as individuals and place more prominence on student voices" (p. 46). Strategies include first-day information sheets, first-day group work to create "classroom norms" (p. 46), and a practice of calling on multiple students to address a question rather than just hearing from one. Indeed, at-home instruction has led educators to practices that can be put in place to increase student voice and bolster their social skills.

Moving forward, embracing these practices will aid in the necessary rebound of student socialization.

Regardless of the gains discovered through at-home online learning, in-person interactions are still more beneficial for many students. During my days of online instruction, I was met with blank screens on discussion boards and silence when I scheduled live virtual meetings with students. Thus, many students require face-to-face interactions for true engagement and socialization.

Horváth et al. (2022) reported that the "mental distress caused by online education must be addressed by offline community-building, bonding, and lively discussions" (p. 16). Though the students were socially distanced, both physically and mentally, when we returned to in-person instruction, it was my desire and duty to find a way to reach these students and foster a culture of open communication in the classroom setting. I wanted to explore those methods and practices that encourage student engagement and social participation in order to see my students thrive in the post-pandemic classroom.

Resocialization By Giving Voice to Students

The first tool I implemented shortly after the return of students to the classroom was online *chalkboard* platforms, such as Padlet. This was utilized in the classroom not as a replacement for verbal discussion, but rather as a bridge that leads to verbal discussion. For example, I implemented a revised Padlet activity I had formerly employed during online learning and decided to tweak the activity to include a component of verbal communication. The purpose of this was to engage students in a first-day class discussion about the importance of English. In my attempt at humor, the Padlet displayed the infamous Homer Simpson with a blurb where he is questioning why he needs English if he is not going to England.

Students were then asked to brainstorm, individually, why they thought English (composition and literature) courses are important. Once they generated ideas in Padlet, I pointed out and validated some of their points. Then, after being placed into small groups of three to four, students were asked to share one or two of the ideas in informal conversation among their group members. This scaffolded type of discussion was relatively effortless because students had already been asked to consider the topic and generate ideas individually.

I found this method of discussion much more effective than my previous tactic of calling on students in whole-class discussions. In my former attempt, students either did not respond or responded succinctly and in little detail, but students in this revamped exercise more freely offered detailed responses. This approach, I discovered, was more conducive to discussion because it avoids positioning students in a pressure situation that requires them to think on the fly, and it establishes a more comfortable and less intimidating environment to share their ideas.

To conclude our Padlet activity, I invited each group to share a few of the ideas that were discussed in their group conversations. Even if some of my students did not speak in front of the entire class, at this point all had the opportunity to talk within their groups, setting a precedent of low-pressure verbal discussion. While this activity certainly proved a huge asset in encouraging student discussions in the post-pandemic classroom, particularly to break the ice on the first day of instruction, it has also proven a beneficial tool to launch discussions in all classes and is a practice I will continue to utilize.

Additionally, I have used Padlet as a tool for schema activation. Before our class discussion of Bonnie Smith-Yackel's narrative "My Mother Never Worked" (1975/2021), I started with a Padlet that asked students to share their thoughts regarding payment of social security death benefits to family members who had never worked by government tax standards. The majority of students

openly expressed opinions against payment of such benefits. However, once we read the story, I asked them the same question again, allowing them to respond on Padlet again.

After a few minutes, I followed a similar process mentioned in the first example, highlighting interesting student responses and noting how those perspectives had altered after students read and reflected on the piece. At this point in the activity, students were eager to engage in this whole-class discussion and share their explanations of their opinion shifts in more depth. Those who held strong in their original stance regarding social security benefits also wanted an opportunity to vocalize their reasoning about why Smith-Yackel's narrative had not altered their perspective. Prying responses from students was a thing of the past as hands shot up across the room, and I shifted from discussion leader to moderator, as many wanted to have a voice in the conversation.

By affording students an opportunity to first export their thoughts in writing, they gained the confidence to speak about them. Again, the objective is not to substitute in-class verbal discussions with an online platform but to utilize these online tools as a *springboard* to foster verbal discussion and support resocialization of students.

Pandemic Impact: Written Communication

Socialization is not the only classroom challenge that has resulted from the isolation of students during the pandemic. While students struggle to communicate verbally, so, too, do they struggle to effectively express themselves in writing, from e-mails to formal compositions. Data from the Texas Success Center (2022) reveal that students who were able to successfully complete first-year college composition (with a grade of A, B, or C) within one year of enrollment dropped from 54% in 2019 to 52% in 2020; this was during the time of at-home pandemic learning. While this decrease may seem slight, it is important to note that prior to the pandemic, the rate had gradually been increasing across the state since 2016. While data post-2020 has not yet been released by the Texas Success Center, it will be interesting to see if this downward trend continues in the wake of the pandemic.

While there does not currently exist a wealth of literature documenting impacts on at-home learning and the writing of college composition students, there is research that explores certain takeaways about composition instruction during this time. For example, one study sought to find best practices that could be utilized in future virtual instruction in the post-COVID-19 classroom. Sheppard (2021) explains that it was not poor quality of student writing instructors expressed concern about, but rather a problem of students simply not producing. One instructor in this survey explained, "Chasing after students to turn in assignments and fulfill course requirements was very time consuming. Being compassionate and flexible was necessary and the best way under the circumstances, but it was a lot to ask" (p. 64). I, too, experienced a decline in student writing submissions during pandemic instruction, and completion rates within my courses declined during that time.

On a positive note, Sheppard (2021) explains that "asynchronous discussion takes place through writing. Not only does this increase the quantity of the writing students do, the interaction with their peers through writing offers greater opportunities to develop such practices as audience awareness, clarity, persuasion, use of sources, and more" (p. 66). While more opportunities may have existed for students during the pandemic, those opportunities did not necessarily result in enhanced writing skills of students (and none were reported in this study).

Another study by Lieske et al. (2022) investigated the preparedness of college writing instructors to deliver online composition instruction during the pandemic. This article alludes to problems associated with a lack of online instructional training for faculty, which resulted in instructors feeling unprepared to teach composition in the online format (p. 71). Engagement issues with students were also described in this study (p. 70), similar to the previous study, but it also does not specifically address writing during the pandemic or the impact on the quality of writing produced during online-only instruction.

So, while we do not have much information reported on the writing experience or the quality of student writing during the pandemic, what we do know is that success data of students who complete college composition within one year of college enrollment have declined in Texas since the pandemic; therefore, we must focus our attention on addressing this issue with our post-pandemic students.

Bringing Back Written Communication With Narratives and Reflection

One foundational approach I have utilized to aid students in rebuilding writing skills is to begin the writing process with the familiar by using a narrative approach. While narrative writing might not be perceived as true *academic* writing, it is a writing style that most students will respond to with ease and serves as a foundation for other forms of more complex and higher demanding writing tasks. Because I was teaching students who were now hesitant and struggling to express themselves in all forms of communication, I wanted a writing assignment design that would establish a level of comfort and rebuild confidence (similar to the Padlet approach to discussions). Asking students to tell a story by sharing a personal experience is an effective way to help them spark their creative energy by writing about what is most familiar to them.

My preferred narrative assignment is a literacy narrative that asks students to tell the story of their literacy acquisition (how it is they learned to read and write) with an emphasis on writing in the most basic sense and how these skills have developed over the years. They discuss what factors or individuals most impacted their literacy journey and how these influences affected their perceptions of their own writing. In their responses, students often write about their early literacy experiences, but also about their experiences in trying to learn and write at home during the pandemic. Through their expression of these vulnerabilities, I have been able to provide feedback to students on how we can work past these disturbances and barriers to grow their composition skills.

Engaging students with this type of literacy narrative sets the stage for the reflective writing they will complete in subsequent assignments. Again, the point of this assignment is to establish a low-pressure writing opportunity that will boost students' confidence in their writing ability as they begin to think about the act of writing as a social activity, which is of utmost importance if post-pandemic socialization is to come to fruition.

Once the stage was set with the narrative pieces, I attempted to address both this issue of written communication skills as well as the concern of resocialization through reflective peer review exercises. In these exercises, students are placed in review groups in a roundtable discussion. These are small groups of no larger than three to four students in which each person presents a written piece to the group by reading it aloud. Group members follow along on their printed copies, taking notes and annotating the draft as necessary.

Next, in a practice I am certain many teachers of composition already employ, students are asked a series of questions about the draft. The key, though, is to answer these questions *together* as a discussion of the paper. This exercise differs greatly from the pre-pandemic peer-review exercise I conducted in my class. Those were simple exchanges of drafts where students read one another's work and then shared basic feedback.

The point now is to conduct a writing workshop that brings all voices of the group to the table, including the author of the paper. Students are able to advance social skills lost during the pandemic isolation through engagement in true discussion of their drafts. Additionally, students participate in meaningful thinking and conversations about the development of their writing in low-risk environments with their peers.

Finally, another component I have added to my peer review process in the post-pandemic classroom is a reflection paper focused on their writing process. They write about changes they plan to make to the draft, highlighting the reasoning behind the changes. If they choose not to make suggested changes, they must also reflect and write about why the changes are not necessary and what is effective about the current draft that warrants no changes.

This reflective peer review exercise not only provides students with an opportunity to receive and provide feedback on their writing tasks, but it also affords them an opportunity to think critically about their writing and the progression of their writing through the peer review process and editing and revising phases. In my experience, it is important to establish these opportunities for reflection for *new* post-pandemic students as they work to regain confidence in their writing skills.

Teaching Into the Future

While there does not exist a singular prescribed antidote to combat the challenges associated with the post-pandemic classroom, there are many strategies that can be employed that will aid in the resocialization of the students, as well as practices we can apply to help students rebuild both their oral and written communication skills. While educators are making promising strides in our learning about how best to serve the post-pandemic student in the composition classroom, we must put to rest the notion that students and the classrooms of our pre-COVID-19 existence will ever return to *normal*. It is up to us as educators to learn through our pandemic teaching experiences (and there have been some insightful moments, for sure) while exhibiting continual flexibility and adaptivity to the changes and challenges presented in the post-pandemic classroom.

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