

12 Exploring the pandemic through language learning and multicultural studies

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Abstract

This piece offers a reflection on how language learning and multicultural studies during the pandemic have highlighted the potential to help communities draw parallels with, and face wider issues concerning, minorities within a challenged society. Through storytelling, a novel approach to teaching and learning helps students find their voice and become active agents of change. A review of teaching and learning methods may bring about improvements both in academia and individual circumstances to help bridge the gap between loneliness and the need to be part of a wider social community. This article reiterates the importance of language learning, cultural understanding, and identity as useful employability skills for the new global graduates to support, rebuild, and unite communities especially in challenging times.

Keywords: multilingualism, learner communities, LGBTQi+, Black lives.

In the months since lockdown, as the world reacted to a global pandemic, educators have been forced to explore ways to continue teaching. In the move to *remote learning*, we have needed to adapt and redesign learning for a new setting, somewhere between an online course and a classroom. Unable to carry out face-to-face instruction we have asked ourselves what this space is, what is *emergency remote learning*?

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As a British academic currently working at a US university, the political and social tensions that have surfaced during the pandemic have forced me to rethink my teaching and examine the support that I provide for students, for whom the upheaval has been nothing short of traumatic. Many have struggled to adapt, are understandably anxious about their futures, and, forced to spend time in front of screens writing, reading, and watching, they question the cost of their education.

The courses I teach in language learning and multicultural studies aim to provide students with the tools to tell stories about their own experiences, exploring how culture and language have shaped their identity. Many students find it challenging to be asked to express themselves in this way and shape outcomes that are uniquely personal. While there are no ‘right’ answers to many of the topics we discuss, frameworks and theories guide us through moral and philosophical complexities to help us better understand our context. Through digital storytelling, students produce outcomes that speak to these reflections and mirror aspects of their own relationship with culture and language.

The students I meet are with rare exception multilingual, mostly bilingual, and many competent with a third or even fourth language. They are international students and American students, Black students and students of Colour drawing on a life lived in heritage communities as Asian American, Indian American, African American, Hispanic and Latino, Arab Americans, and the interwoven identities of their families and neighbourhoods. They live at the intersection of language, moving between lingua Franca, patios, creole, local dialects, slang; mixing words, and blending conversations to suit the context, generation, setting, and amplifying meaning.

When the world changed and coronavirus spread into our lives some students returned home, some remained in halls or shared houses, some were still abroad or travelling. All seemed to want to somehow keep learning, so we moved online and taught remotely. I built an office in the sunroom on the side of our house and hastily assembled media and recording equipment and made space to teach.

The faces on the screen, those students whom I had taught in class, initially looked slightly dazed and unsure. I tried to express empathy and provide some reassurance as they adjusted to their circumstances. Some students returned home, learning how to live as families again after time apart, they shared meals and stories; many helped to support the household, working on the front lines in supermarkets, chemists, as delivery drivers, and some handing out food packages or helping elderly neighbours. They tried to stay active, grateful for flexibility, and understanding from their teachers and instructors as they adjusted to the changes in their lives. It seemed as if everyone was *making do*, coping with being back home in sometimes challenging conditions, sharing rooms with siblings, contributing to the household; many sharing feelings of loneliness and anxiety about coping during this time.

I thought that I might be more prepared than others as an experienced learning technologist with an understanding of online learning and familiarity with tools and apps. Eager to share and support, I wrote a quick piece about transition, just as I was organising myself. I talked about the online space, the value of online facilitation, and the distinction between synchronous and asynchronous learning. I was grateful for other voices too; those reminding us of the pressures faced by students, that this wasn't online learning, but something else, *emergency remote instruction*. This reminder was useful and helped me shape my strategy for the coming months. Firstly, I stripped the curriculum of everything that was deemed superfluous, additional, or extra work. I refocused on the core learning aims and reduced expected workload. I also looked at ways to make things fun and light, to ensure active learning would take place in this online space in which students would actively participate and not just passively listen.

The course looked better as a result. I settled on a weekly routine of synchronous and asynchronous activity. Starting on a Monday morning with a short announcement for the week, I laid out the aims and sign-posted learning steps built in our learning management system (Canvas). We established a backchannel, using Slack as a space to discuss ideas, share content, and answer questions. On Thursdays we met as a class using Zoom, and the sessions would include discussion and breakout rooms where catching up and sharing news

was as crucial as addressing a prompt. We tried different tools, enjoyed demos, guest speakers (I thank the generosity of all those who put themselves forward), and played games. We dressed up, introduced mascots, attempted experiments, and challenged ourselves with quizzes. There seemed to be an almost optimistic sense, huddled inside with learning to shield ourselves from the danger outside. However, as just one class in a busy schedule, reports that other classes were still piling on the pressure, that students were being shamed for non-attendance or not turning the camera on, that some lecturers were doubling down on assignments and readings, became a depressingly familiar landscape. “Just get them through” became my mantra.

As we moved through the semester and summer, the initial novelty of remote learning wore off and the desire to return to the classroom became more keenly felt. We all missed the social contact, the purposeful rhythms of campus life, the institutional focus that is difficult to replicate online. We were adrift, at home.

In July, following the killings of George Floyd, Brianna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, courageous protesters took to the streets to voice their anger at police brutality and centuries of systemic racism. We quickly realised the parallels, that racism is a pandemic, the murder of Black people. The protesters called against the suppression of Black voices, a system built to deny access to education, basic health care, and worker rights. This crisis, this disease of white supremacy that had killed for hundreds of years.

As multilinguals, heritage speakers, and international students and staff, events in the US made us reflect on racism in other countries, and the way civil unrest and protest are handled. We reflected in class on systems of oppression, discussing events across the world. We talked about language, the use of semantics, and the framing of events by politicians, the media, and those in power even in our own institutions.

Across the world, within Academia and Education, anger, sadness, and a desire for change expressed itself through articles and petitions, marches, and learn-ins. It was clear to many that more needed to be done; that as educators, humanists,

and scholars we had a responsibility, not just to denounce racism and show solidarity, but be actively anti-racist and make changes in our own lives. It is to my shame that this came as a jolt, as I reflected on my own circumstance and privilege, as I thought about the ways that I could provide support and allyship at this time.

I looked more closely at my teaching, thinking about what I needed to re-address and educate myself by reading and listening. I resolved to better get to know my students, their histories and cultures; to amplify the voices and work of Black people and people of Colour in my teaching and recognise the intersectionality of Black LGBTQi+² lives. In my courses, I have always wanted to empower students as agents of change and to explore what that could mean as I reflected on who and what education is for.

Returning to first principles around education, I collected some of my favourite readings, from John Dewey to Paulo Freire, and introduced myself to Bell Hooks and Peter McLaren – educators and practitioners to inform my personal philosophy of education. I affirmed my own desire to teach using constructivist and experiential frameworks. I have never felt surer that my role is to provide a space to nurture caring and creative pedagogies, where students can express themselves, use language, and explore identity with freedom and without fear.

I taught throughout the summer, unable to attend conferences or travel; I made myself useful, wrote, and shared my experiences with others. As we enter a new semester, similar but different pressures exist, the world weary of pandemic and filled with uncertainty, facing decisions about reopening classrooms and resuming activities. Many of my peers are anxious and eager to return, especially those who have struggled with technology and see the socially distanced classroom as an imperfect improvement.

We are working and living through times of unrest and uncertainty and as educators we want to provide meaning, we want to create spaces where understanding can

2. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, ...

be formed. These times are taking their toll; as we reel from the human cost, the tragedy of over a million global deaths and more than 38 million people infected worldwide – as I am writing this article – the pandemic defines everything we do and will continue to shape our futures.

As educators, we have a role in shaping the futures of our students. We know that so many people are anxious about their future, but perhaps this is a moment to recognise and understand how learning about language, culture, and identity can help us support, rebuild, and unite communities. Systemic racism can only be dismantled by understanding our role within it. We can teach students to tell stories, amplify Black and Brown voices, and those marginalised and suppressed within our communities. Students can be agents of social change and build new futures. For our students, the hope is that the experience of having lived through a pandemic and through the Black Lives Matter protests may bring about resilience and empathy.

We must, however, continue to share perspectives and experiences. Multilingual perspectives can help shape discourse, and we can, and must, use language to tell stories and provide meaning. In the courses that I teach, I ask students to draw on their own cultural context to speak of others. We know that one way we can come together to address inequality and support each other is through learning. We have what it takes and that is each other.



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