

Teaching and Learning in COVID Times: A Reflective Critique of a Pedagogical Seminar Course

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Abstract: Teaching pedagogical seminar courses require interactive, hands-on sessions. However, as schools across the United States pivoted online on very short notice amid the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic, several adjustments had to be made, including to the delivery of lessons and forms of communication. In this article, I provide visual narratives of my experience teaching 12 preservice teachers at a liberal arts college in upstate New York. To reflect on my pedagogical moves, I employed the community of inquiry (CoI) framework, a social constructivist model for creating deep and meaningful learning in online and blended environments. Although this framework, which comprises three dimensions, teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence, was not developed for examining learning processes in pandemic times, it was helpful for thinking about my instructional approaches. Hence, the purpose of articulating my thoughts guided by CoI is to offer a reflective critique for thinking about reconstructing a pedagogy during a global crisis.

Keywords: remote teaching, community of inquiry, teacher education, pandemic pedagogy.

On a typical Tuesday at 7:30 a.m., my students and I met in a classroom that had flexible learning spaces equipped with moveable tables and chairs, a desktop computer, a projector, and whiteboards at all corners, conducive for small group presentations. The pedagogical seminar course Teaching English Language Arts in Elementary Schools occurring in this space was attended by 12 liberal arts college students, concurrently placed in New York state schools for early field experience. In the 1-hr seminar that they had with me, each session was typically divided into three parts, theory, practice, and sharing of lesson ideas or role playing micro lessons, that wraps up with a pedagogical critique. While this structure had been working well throughout, the aftermath of the World Health Organization's designation of the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) as a pandemic on March 11, 2020 landed us in a totally new learning space. Connected with the same group of students, I found myself seeing them only through the square boxes of Zoom, a video conferencing tool that had gained popularity in the United States and the rest of the world, overnight. Although I had been on Zoom before, my use was limited to social communication with colleagues from other countries. Truly, teaching remotely via Zoom was new to me. The pivot to remote or online learning required adjustments for my students who had been taking courses that offered face-to-face instruction. By remote or online learning I mean "learning experiences provided over a digital network" (International Society for Technology in Education, 2000) that can be self-directed or instructor led either synchronously or asynchronously. Given the unusual circumstance of worldwide lockdowns and having to teach online to complete the spring semester, I started documenting the beginning of an infinite "new normal" for teaching and learning in my research diary. To examine the pedagogical moves that I made, I applied the community of inquiry (CoI) framework developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (1999), widely used for understanding the online educational experiences of a learner. In my attempt to offer a reflective critique, my thinking was undergirded by the following questions:

1. How is remote learning instruction similar to and/or different from face-to-face instruction?

2. What aspect of teaching did I foreground in COVID-19 times that I may not have given much attention to in face-to-face instruction?
3. What are some recommendations for educators who will be running remote classes?

The CoI Framework

The CoI framework is a social constructivist model for describing learning processes that occur in online and blended environments at the intersections of social, cognitive, and teaching presence (Figure 1). Social presence enables learners to identify with the online learning community, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, be themselves, and develop interpersonal relationships (Garrison, et al., 1999). According to Garrison (2000), social presence exists in three forms: (a) emotional (affective) expression, where learners share personal expressions and values; (b) open communication, where learners develop aspects of mutual awareness and recognition; and (c) group cohesion, where learners build and sustain a sense of group commitment. Cognitive presence, however, refers to the extent of learner engagement in an online environment (Garrison et al., 1999), and teaching presence includes the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes to meet learning outcomes (Garrison et al., 1999). Given these three elements, I offer excerpts of visual narratives and a reflective critique of my remote teaching experience. A total of six remote learning sessions were conducted in spring 2020 for the pedagogical seminar course. Here, I highlight three of them, specifically focusing on the first, middle, and last sessions.

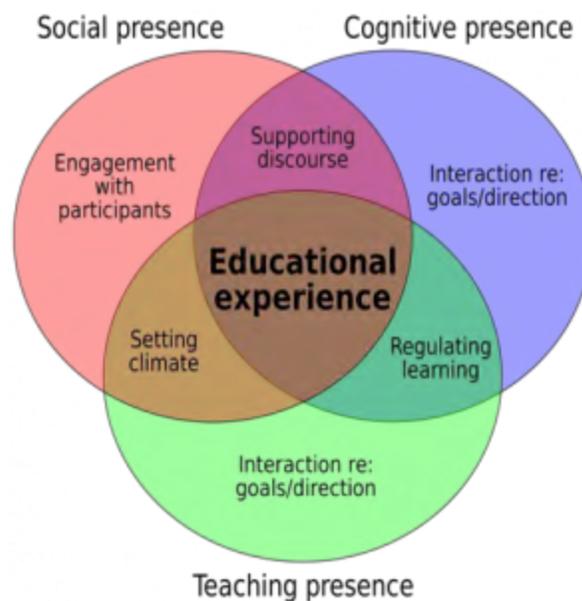


Figure 1. Community of inquiry framework for examining online educational experiences (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999).

Visual Narratives of My Teaching

Remote Learning Session #1. Tuesday, March 24, 2020, 7:30–8:30 a.m.

Our first remote pedagogical seminar began with me creating a social presence; much like how I've always done it in a face-to-face setting, I welcomed my students to class after a week of spring break. In my brief opening words, I invited them to journey along with me in the “new normal” of learning

via a virtual platform on Zoom. While I did understand that it could be a challenge, I reestablished the rapport that I had built in a face-to-face classroom by sharing personal thoughts and feelings about the global pandemic and my coping strategies during the lockdown order. As part of our check-in activity, I asked my students to share the location from which they were connected, their feelings, and how they had been spending their time during the lockdown. Although they were acquainted with the basics of classroom participation, the hasty transition to remote learning prompted me to generate communication practices that would facilitate online discussions. Mimicking traditional classroom norms, I instructed my students to respond to me using the “raise hands” feature and to show “thumbs up” if they agreed by clicking on the “reaction” button on Zoom. Literacy, in this sense, involved the social practice of knowing particular ways of behaving and doing things in a situated environment. Yet, “literacy has not changed because of screens, but...screens have given us a new ‘canvas’ on which to reimagine the world” (Rowell, 2019, p. 52). In a pandemic crisis, how do educators reimagine the world? Do we assume that our students are digital natives who would inherently acculturate to remote learning? My prior experiences told me that we ought to provide support and clear guidance to cushion the effect of transitioning into the new realms for teaching and learning.

After laying out the ground rules and having my students practice responding to me on Zoom, I proceeded with a quick introduction to reading comprehension. Using a classroom-based teaching video from the Accomplished Teaching, Learning and Schools (ATLAS) website (<https://www.nbpts.org/atlas/>), we discussed the comprehension strategies used by a fourth-grade teacher. As Darling-Hammond (2010) noted, learning “to practice, with expert guidance, is essential to becoming a great teacher” (p. 41). By watching the teaching video, students learn about classroom teaching and think about the teaching strategy used by the teacher. This aspect of learning to reflect critically should be given much attention in particular during the pandemic, when uncertainties prevail. Our lesson concluded with key takeaways and the promise to remain optimistic despite the lockdown. As a follow-up, I encouraged each student to share inspirational words on collaborative Google slides that would be used as a check-in activity for the next lesson. Assigning simple unacademic tasks that helped them get through these trying times took precedence in my teaching. To me, taking care of students’ social-emotional well-being is critical in situations where feelings of isolation, fear, and loss are going to continue indefinitely.

Remote Learning Session #3. Tuesday, April 7, 2020, 7:30–8:30 a.m.

Since the pivot to remote learning, I had been starting classes with a simple check-in activity. From the third lesson onward, we began with a virtual breakfast. As a set-up, I suggested each student have a cup of coffee, tea, or any other beverage and a simple meal that they could eat. To create a convivial ambience for a virtual breakfast, I chose an image of a warmly-lit room with tables and empty seats as my Zoom background (Figure 2). Although the virtual background may not have had much impact, I believe it created a safe space for sharing. The fact that our class interaction within the virtual space of Zoom took place in real time made it almost akin to face-to-face communication. However, I acknowledge that remote learning very often lends itself to isolation. Hence, the main intent of setting up a virtual breakfast session within our class time was to break down communication barriers. According to Franks, Bell, and Trueman (2016), by providing opportunities for my students to interact with one another, I was creating “a sense of real, shared space” (p. 187) on Zoom.



Figure 2. Virtual background on my Zoom screen to set the stage for our virtual breakfast session.

As they were having breakfast, the students took turns speaking. I posted prompts for the check-in activity on Friday of the previous week to give my students ample time to read and think (see the agenda in Figure 3). In all the check-in sessions, I got them to talk about how they felt before they responded to the other questions. I did this to encourage student engagement so that there was a sense of social presence to sustain learning.

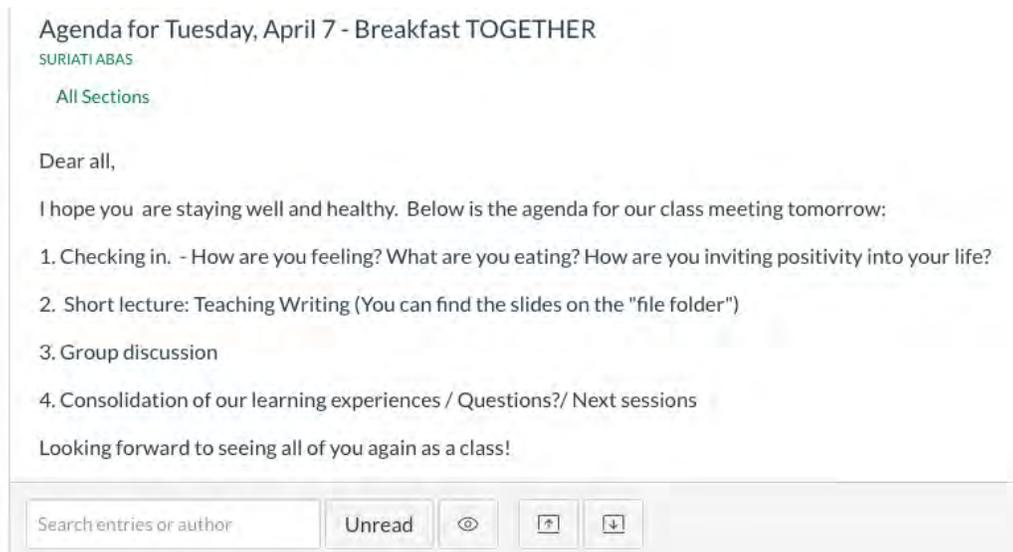


Figure 3. Agenda sent to students the week before the next class meeting.

Once everyone had had a chance to speak, I took over the Zoom session and began with a short lecture on teaching writing. To demonstrate the strategy of interactive writing, I played a video of an elementary classroom teacher teaching writing. Prior to watching, I provided time for students

to read the questions posted on Canvas (our school's learning management system) so that they would be able to take note of the strategy and discuss with their classmates (see Figure 4). This time around, I used the "breakout group" feature on Zoom to randomly assign my students to smaller groups for discussion. Although my face-to-face lessons have always been discussion based, I felt a slight difference when moving to facilitating discussions via Zoom. While I could move from one breakout room to another, it felt a little disconnected; I could no longer hear students buzzing their thoughts together as I could in a traditional classroom. The other thing I missed was the creaking sounds of chairs as they moved and got together into smaller groups. Despite being the least important matter in teaching and learning, noises generated in an enclosed classroom space suddenly gained my attention. There is something about being physically present with the essential tools for teaching and learning that could not be replaced virtually. In a typical classroom, I would go around and exercise flexibility with the timing for group discussions, but the technology of Zoom automatically transported students back to the main room within the specified time limit. On a positive note, it kept everyone on task. When we reconvened, representatives from each group reported on their responses to the classroom video. The lesson concluded with a quick summary on interactive writing.

Watch the video. Then respond to the following questions.



1. What did the teacher do during interactive writing?
2. What do you think are the strengths of this lesson?
3. What possible amendment(s) would you suggest to this lesson?

Figure 4. Questions posted on Canvas to prepare students for in-class discussion.

After the week's lesson, I sent inspirational words with the intent of supporting my students' social-emotional needs (Figure 5).

A Note For All - Take What You need

Apr 17 at 9am

SURIATI ABAS

All Sections

Dear all,

With the passing of time, we've been traversing into the "alternative universe" of remote learning for four weeks. Thank you for sending in the drafts faithfully. I would like to end the week by asking you to...



Figure 5. Inspirational words posted on the Canvas announcement page at the end of the week.

Remote Learning Session #6, Tuesday, April 28, 2020, 7:30–8:30 a.m.

For the last remote learning session, my students discussed an article related to teaching and pedagogy with a professor and six preservice teachers whom he was teaching in Singapore (Figure 6). They were told a few weeks earlier about this opportunity and assigned a reading to prepare for the discussion. On the day itself, the session began with a simple introduction and objectives shared on Google Slides, made accessible to students from both countries. The discussion questions were reiterated on the presentation slides with templates for each group to type their responses and use them for presentation by building on the same Google Slides. As the host, I assigned the students to their breakout groups and moved the professor and myself around. Although I had the facility to control the discussion session, it felt unusual to move two of us around in separate rooms. Similar to in the traditional classroom structure, students reconvened as a class to present their views. The discussion, although enriching, seemed too short, as noted by students from both countries. In their feedback they indicated would have liked to have been given more time to get to know one another aside from engaging in discussions.

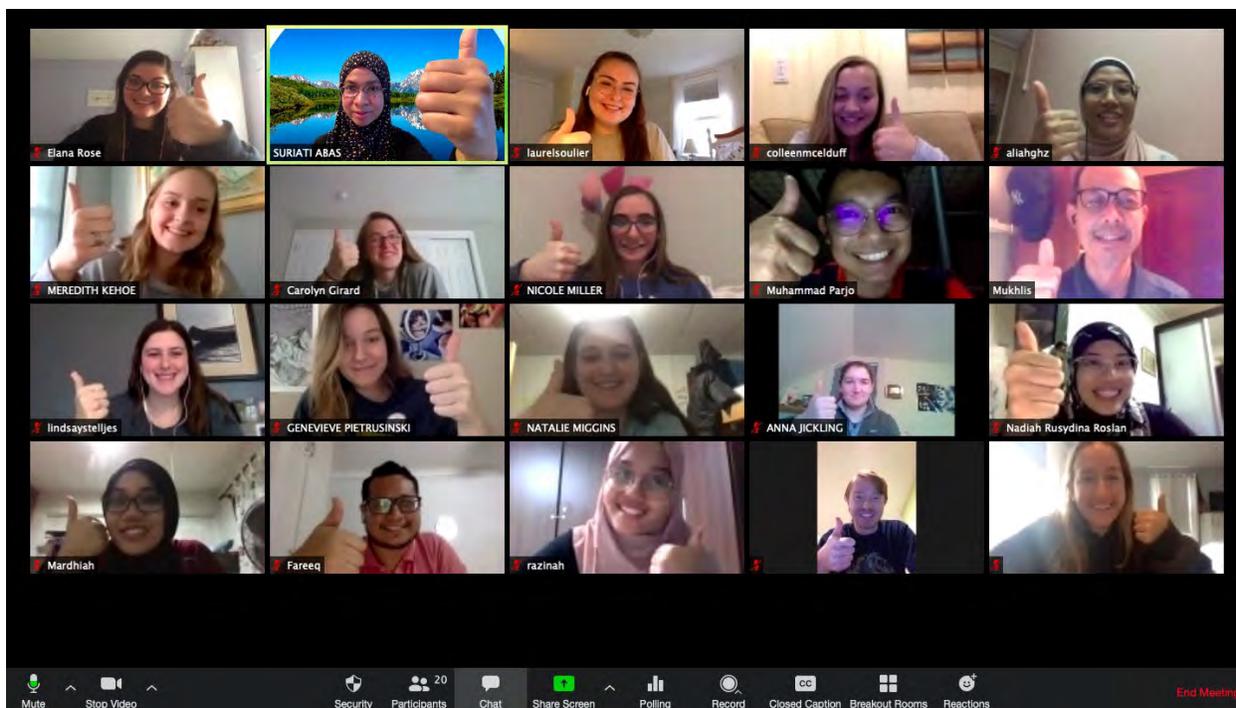


Figure 6. Preservice teachers from the United States and Singapore. Screenshot courtesy of the author. Reproduced with permission of the participants.

Discussion

In my visual narratives, each of the three elements of the CoI framework, social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence, can be seen in the pedagogical seminar sessions. Although meeting learning objectives has always been a top priority in all of my lessons, I reframed my approach to teaching; I invested time in helping students process what was happening around them through regular check-in sessions, sending inspirational words, and providing space for them to decompress, engage with one another, and express themselves both synchronously and asynchronously (see Table 1). While the hallmark of remote learning involves sustained, contiguous, two-way communication between students and professors to negotiate meaningful knowledge (Garrison & Shale, 1990), during this pandemic period, the element of social presence included attention to the social-emotional needs of students. As Ahmad (2020) advised, “successful crisis adaptation requires a flexible approach that allows you to reboot and reimagine your process in real time.” The flexibility that I created for my students and myself centered on scaling down the course content. As we continued to wage war on the invisible enemy, I began to think about what my students truly needed in these unprecedented times. Should I continue to offer an array of learning experiences as promised by the university? I incorporated small and whole class discussions on Zoom, but I simplified the learning tasks to sustain cognitive presence. Although we were on lockdown to minimize the spread of the coronavirus, I created more opportunities for my students to interact with one another virtually. These included a one-time joint discussion and presentation with preservice teachers from a public university in Singapore during our final pedagogical seminar session. Although students from both institutions successfully worked together to put up an informal presentation based on the assigned reading, I could have planned a self-introduction session prior to our Zoom meeting. I believe that if I had given the students the chance to meet asynchronously on a free video platform such as Flipgrid (<https://info.flipgrid.com/>), they would

have had ample time to get to know one another and continue exchanging ideas even after the class discussion session.

Table 1. A summary of how student engagement was sustained in my pedagogical seminar course during the 2019 coronavirus pandemic, according to the three elements of the community of inquiry framework.

Social presence	Cognitive presence	Teaching presence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check-in activity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Students sharing inspirational words with one another ○ Responses to prompts posted on the day's agenda • Virtual breakfast setting • Addressing social-emotional learning needs • Follow-up summary of takeaways at the end of each session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Break-out group activity (small group discussions) • Whole-class discussion • Inter-university discussions and presentations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weekly synchronous sessions • Small group discussions • Addressing social-emotional learning needs • Follow-up summary of takeaways at the end of each session

Since this course was not designed for online instruction, my attempts to create a teaching presence were made by running the seminar sessions synchronously. As I analyzed them, I realized that I was unintentionally following Cormier and Siemans's (2010) recommendations for active teaching presence:

- **Amplifying:** I directed students to important ideas/concepts and pedagogical strategies that helped them understand how specific skills were taught in elementary schools.
- **Curating:** I selected readings based on the topic to be covered for the week, and used videos and other resources to scaffold teaching strategies.
- **Aggregating:** I used the students' postings from the discussion board on Canvas to highlight key ideas that arose in the online postings.
- **Modeling:** I modeled several teaching strategies that I expected my students to put into practice.

As can be seen from the visual narratives of my teaching, I also developed a teaching presence by sending encouraging and motivational words at the end of each week (see Figure 5). Despite the simplified syllabus, maintaining continual presence was key to sustaining students' engagement during the pandemic. In doing so, I modeled for these students the importance of exercising flexibility in classroom teaching. As Keefe and Steiner (2018) stated, teachers must continue to meet the changing needs of students. Hence, there is a need to prepare teacher candidates to be adaptable and equip them with digital competencies for navigating in a virtual environment.

Concluding Thoughts

Pivoting a course to remote instruction meant making a host of decisions. One of the main ones was whether to hold classes synchronously, with students meeting in real time, or asynchronously, where there would be more flexibility for students to participate at their convenience. To me, the synchronous option provided continuity of the planned in-person instruction after the sudden switch to remote instruction. I believe it would offer students a slight sense of normalcy that they might be craving amid the lockdown. On the flipside, asking students to attend classes synchronously raised issues of inequities when students do not have access to internet connection at home or, may not have a conducive space for remote learning. Whatever that choice, I would recommend incorporating social-emotional learning-related messages or check-ins (see Figure 5) at the beginning of each class to develop greater social presence.

Another thought that came to mind was about developing cognitive presence using appropriate technological tools. For this pedagogical seminar, my students were already acquainted with all the features on Canvas (online discussion, collaboration via Google docs, audio recording, etc.) and so the transition to remote learning was smooth and easy. Had this been planned for a new semester, I would have included other technological tools that are freely available and accessible on laptops, desktops, and mobile phones. The rationale is to provide students with more technology-enriched learning experiences so that they are able to apply the teaching strategies and use some of these tools (where appropriate) across a different context such as an elementary school setting. Considering that most students have never taken online courses and that they did not sign up to complete their coursework remotely, a strong teaching presence is essential. However, for the remaining 6 weeks of classes following the shift, I avoided information-heavy presentations. Helping students get through the semester in the midst of uncertainties was my priority.

One thing that I would suggest to educators who are running classes remotely would be to establish routines. This includes making contact with students prior to class by conveying the agenda, assigning clear online tasks during scheduled class time (be it synchronous or asynchronous), and wrapping up the week's takeaways a day after. Unlike in-person instruction where communication takes place mostly during scheduled class time, remote instruction calls for more frequent online contact to sustain students' learning and motivation. While many educators try to replicate real-life school experiences in the virtual environment, it may not be possible in some instances. In reality, no amount of digital interaction can fully replace students' need for meaningful, in-person connections with their classmates, professors, and campus administrators. Teaching and learning in pandemic times inherently open up opportunities for growth and experimentation. Yet, the key to meeting learners' needs is flexibility, constant adaptation, and a positive mindset. Online learning will likely remain in higher education, post-COVID.

Epilogue

COVID-19 propelled all of us to embrace new literacies more rapidly than we could ever have imagined. As a professor who has been advocating the use of technology in teaching and learning, I witnessed my students, colleagues, and the educational fraternity growing organically, within creative constraints. Yet at this juncture, I have no inkling what post-COVID schools might look like: Do we really need a physical space to teach? Should we abandon virtual meetings to make up for the loss of social interactions? What are our commitments to schools, society, and the world? In a highly volatile context, I think it is practical for us to redefine our goals, priorities, and vision for ourselves, our families, our students, and the people around us. As we know, COVID-19 has sent a strong

message that we need to support one another through these difficult times and most importantly, to remain safe and healthy.

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