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Co-Realizing COVID Co-Teaching Concerns: Recognizing Present Challenges to Student Equity in Remote Instruction

Matt Albert
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, alberm4@unlv.nevada.edu

Chyllis Scott
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, chyllis.scott@unlv.edu

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Author 1: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4301-4034 Author 2: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9508-4184 This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The authors also declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Matt Albert, Doral Academy Red Rock High School, 610 Crossbridge Drive, Las Vegas, NV 89138. Email: alberm4@unlv.nevada.edu; (708) 217-4745; phone: (702) 776-8740; fax: (702) 895-4898.

Co-Realizing COVID Co-Teaching Concerns

Recognizing Present Challenges to Student Equity in Remote Education

Matt Albert & Chyllis Scott

Abstract

When the COVID-19 pandemic began to affect in-person schooling, teachers around the world expressed a balance of optimism for new possibilities in instruction along with trepidation at the challenges which lay ahead. Shortly after March 2020 and into the 2021 school year, even 2022 for some, remote instruction became the norm for many educators. As the pandemic persisted, the optimism teachers first exhibited began to wane considerably as several challenges to student access arose. These issues (e.g., Internet connectivity, crowded living spaces becoming workspaces, children and adults simultaneously working at home, etc.) pose significant threats to equity in education, and they ironically become troublesome in courses whose objectives include analyzing and discussing inequity in education. This article presents a modified retelling of an end-of-course discussion between a graduate student and his adviser after they spent a semester co-teaching in a remote setting. The dialogue includes positive moments of instruction as well as recognized challenges to equity. The article concludes with suggestions for further research on synchronous remote instruction.

Keywords: content area literacy, disciplinary literacy, remote instruction, graduate student mentoring

Introduction

This piece was written more for therapeutic reasons than research purposes—hopefully not just for us but for our colleagues as well. We do not claim to

Matt Albert is an English teacher at The Meadows School in Las Vegas, Nevada. Chyllis Scott is an associate professor of literacy at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. Email address: alberm4@unlv.nevada.edu

be experts in online instruction, and we fully accept our teaching struggles of the past couple of years. As 2022 continues, it has been over two full calendar years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. That means it has also been over two full calendar years since education was sideswiped in a way few teachers (as well as schools, students, parents, teacher educators, etc.) saw coming and for which even fewer were ready. During the onset of social distancing and the accompanying drastic switch to full-time online instruction, optimism ran high about the resilience of teachers and their suddenly homebound students (Jandric et al., 2020). Some teachers expressed hope in the idea of providing a sense of normalcy through online instruction, while others even went so far as to proclaim it would be the easiest transition ever, and still more others looked forward to what would be energizing collaboration with students in unprecedented times (Jandric et al., 2020; Mishra et al., 2020).

After the first year of online instruction, teachers' optimism had been largely eradicated by dismay at the systemic inequities facing students and the utter lack of readiness on the part of thousands of well-meaning teachers (Jandric et al., 2021; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Trust & Whalen, 2020). What began as great hope for the future of education turned into lamentations about connectivity problems, unconducive spaces for physical learning, mental health, lack of basic needs, and a dearth of resources for effective online teaching and learning (Mseleku, 2020). Many teachers struggled with determining the best practices for the implementation of certain platforms, and they found the task even more daunting as wave after wave of programs promising increased student engagement were bought and distributed like Halloween candy (Mishra et al., 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2020). Few to none of these efforts/resources added up to nearly the amount of success teachers had hoped for, save for the sparse individuals who fortunately found the transition seamless and productive (Jandric et al., 2021).

At the time of this project, the first author of this paper was a third-year doctoral student, and the second author was his adviser (and still is currently). As teachers and teacher educators ourselves, we feel an obligation to add to the growing corpus of COVID-teaching stories from educators all over the world in hopes of us progressing as professionals in spite of an untenable situation. Both of our experiences contained plenty of success stories with an almost equal number of disappointing realities, mostly related to problems that continue to hamper access to education.

Context of This Manuscript

Before sharing our conversations, we both feel it is necessary to provide some brief context both on how this paper came to be as well as the course we co-taught.

Addressing Our Reviewers

Our original manuscript was much more traditional in format and style. Of the three reviewers who evaluated our original piece, two accepted it for publication and one suggested substantial revisions such as tightening up the focus of our theoretical frame, being more explicit about our positionality, and addressing some ambiguities with our initial narrative approach. We agreed with the vast majority of the critiques by this reviewer.

As we began to revise the piece based on Reviewer #1's critiques, we saw our piece progressing towards a very traditionally formatted manuscript. That really was not what we wanted our piece to be in the first place. We ultimately realized we had taken on far too much during the writing process because our initial inspiration for the piece was now completely swamped and going in too many directions. As teachers and teacher educators, we wanted this piece to be a written record of some of the challenges and inequities (our experiences) we saw while co-teaching during COVID, and we also wanted to encourage other educators to document their own experiences from this time so that future teachers can learn from the past. This version of the paper gets us back to those roots.

There was only one suggestion by Reviewer #1 with which we disagreed—the removal of our occasional uses of colloquial language. With respect to the reviewer (and others as readers), we disagree with this idea because the editors of this very journal are unafraid to break this norm (Fasching-Varner et al., 2020). If they can do it, so can we. Engaging on this idea also made us feel that mere use of colloquial language only scratched the surface of being non-traditional in an academic journal; therefore, during our revision, we took things further by making the piece even more transgressive in format, too. As you read our conversation, you will see how we did exactly that.

Course Context and Students

The co-taught course centered on graphic novels under the lenses of content-area literacy (CAL) and disciplinary literacy (DL). For readers who are unfamiliar, CAL is described as the student-centered approach of incorporating general reading and writing strategies in content-area classes to promote students' learning of content-area information as well as skills and strategies (e.g., KWL, graphic organizers, Readers' Theater; see Fisher & Ivey, 2005; Vacca & Vacca, 2005), whereas DL refers to specific discipline-specific practices and the integration of these authentic, content-specific literacy practices and knowledge as "the use of texts in their respective disciplines" (Colwell et al., 2021, p. 9) and "to the shared ways of reading, writing, thinking, and reasoning within academic fields" (Rainey & Moje, 2012, p. 73).

We selected graphic novels to support this instruction and topic because of how they require the reader to interact with the pictures, resulting in a complex

form of reading. The course allowed us to challenge the preconception of equating graphic novels with comics because graphic novels "can be any genre, and tell any kind of story, just like their prose counterparts. The format is what makes the story a graphic novel, and usually includes text, images, word balloons, sound effects, and panels" (Scholastic, 2013, p. 2). After consulting with the university librarian who specializes in graphic novels and later doing some independent research, the following eight texts were selected and required for this course: *American Born Chinese, Cinderella: The graphic novel*, *Dog Man: For whom the ball rolls.El Deafo, March: Book One, Persepolis: The story of a childhood, Primates: The fearless science of Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, and Birute Galdikas, Sisters.* They were diverse in grade levels and readability, topics, and genres. Diverse and varying levels of graphic novels were used as vehicles for considering issues related to grade-level readability, discipline-specific learning, social difference, social justice, identity, etc. Additionally, the course was built from a sociocultural lens, exploring the differences in language development, experiences, and cultures. Assignments included: weekly dialogic engagement via Zoom, weekly synthesis journal, online discussions, strategy-teach lesson, academic resource presentation, and a graphic novel text set.

Aside from the authors of this paper acting as co-teachers, there were eight students. All eight students were graduate-level, seven masters-level students and one doctoral-level student (first author). Seven were current teachers of record in local schools (i.e., state school district and charter) and one was new to education and had no prior teaching experience. Their teaching preparation and experiences also varied from kindergarten to high school (i.e., English language arts, journalism).

A Conversation Between Co-Teachers

At the conclusion of our course, we (the authors) met over Zoom to do a debrief, much in the same way we had met for all other stages of planning the course. The following conversation is a recreation of our in-person conversation we had that evening, but for clarity's sake, it also contains contextual references from prior text messages we exchanged during the semester. Leaving out some of that context would make parts of the recreation too confusing. Some of the grammar and syntax of our conversation has also been slightly cleaned up for readability. However, these dialogue bubbles are essentially the conversation we had in reflecting on our own experiences.

December, 2021

How do you think it went?

Chyllis Scott

Matt Albert

Ugh, hard to say for sure. Overall, I feel like we delivered on what we were supposed to give our students. I definitely now know that I work much better in an in-person setting with colleagues rather than an online setting. There is something about the collective energy within a room when trying to put together something to benefit a larger group of people. But I guess when we can't do that, I suppose meeting online is still better than nothing at all.

As faculty, I strive to work hard and provide rewarding, yet challenging learning environments. But it is still true that as a mother of young children, I needed this course to be remote and was not ready to teach face-to-face. I do know that I prefer teaching face-to-face, as much of my teaching and energy is lost in translation virtually.

Chyllis Scott

Matt Albert

I get that. I don't want you to jeopardize your own health, your family's health, and the health of others.

Something else that stuck with me was how both of us had a fair amount of teaching experience pre-COVID. Part of me wants to believe teaching stays the same regardless of setting. But as the course progressed, I felt more iffy about how I was actually performing my role. I knew the students were learning because the discussions and the strategy-teaches provided evidence of progress. Still, the experience did not always have the same energetic vibe I am used to when I am in my own classroom.

Matt Albert

Chyllis Scott

Me, too. As the lead instructor, I often wondered and questioned my own role with how I was helping not just my students but you as well. How or what more I could do to help you in co-teaching? Was the co-teaching, just that, co-teaching? Did I scaffold enough? Was I letting you experience the teaching of a graduate course enough? Simply, was I doing enough? It turns out all of our reflection and dialogue really helped because we both pushed each other to be better educators, not only for this course, but other courses.ll.

Oh, the support was definitely there. Short of you being able to inject superhuman amounts of energy when students got lethargic, I don't know what else could have been done to keep that classwide "spark" going. Engaging activities produced results, but we could still see and feel the fatigue online learning brought to the students.

Matt Albert

Chyllis Scott

Something else: No matter how prepared we all try to be, there are just times where home life gets in the way of online learning. We had a student who had to corral a kindergartener at the same time she was presenting and then also compete with the noise of a relative making dinner. Then we had another student who was trying to work a job and attend class simultaneously, to the point where her job would not allow her to turn on her camera. Even if they wanted to come to campus for a more focused setting, the situation wouldn't allow it. That's not their fault.

Matt Albert

Chyllis Scott

Again, as a mother of a toddler, the above scenario rings true. This is not the first time a student's child has attended one of my classes, and it will not be the last. However, it admittedly was distracting not only to the student, but to the other students in the course. Are these topics that need to be raised and addressed, or is it the newest reality of online instruction? Does the student that was working while attending class warrant a discussion?

Hmm, can we really use the same set of norms for in-person instruction in an online setting? I feel like we both tried to do that throughout the semester because it's what we're used to using. I think it is rather telling how we're focusing more on the classroom environment than anything else. We haven't even talked about the challenges of working with students taking a literacy course who have no prior teaching experience and are skeptical of pedagogical research. I thought you handled that student's skepticism really well! It never felt tense.

Matt Albert

Chyllis Scott

The discussion board posts helped out a lot with that. It was valuable for me to read their written posts because I gained a better understanding of their knowledge of the content, but also possible areas of weakness. A student would say they didn't see the value of the selected readings, and another student would acknowledge the same text was very informative and they were already planning to use in their own classroom.

You also integrated theory and application of instructional strategies as often as possible. Everything you did during the class could be tied back to something we had assigned for the readings and the activities. Of course, at the same time, I still wonder if we truly reached everyone because of all of the situations we just talked about. I mean, what good is an in-class discussion centered on critical literacy principles if a student cannot gain full access to the discussion in the first place because they are being hindered by the very systems we are analyzing?

Matt Albert

Chyllis Scott

I agree. The course needs further development. At least the majority of the students were open and receptive to the content and the readings. Discourse is a necessary method to deepen the conversations for learning, but it requires all students to engage and participate. We need that buy-in! These discussions are only useful and successful when there is student buy-in and active participation.

Do you think anyone out there could benefit from hearing how this all went for us?

Matt Albert

Chyllis Scott

Our Hopes From Our Colleagues

While co-teaching/co-facilitating is not a recent innovation in a variety of settings (e.g., education, nursing, business, etc.), the idea of doing synchronous co-taught online courses during a global pandemic is a new challenge for thousands of educators around the world (Jandric et al., 2020). Unfortunately, we struggled to find a significant amount of contributions in prior research *specifically related to teaching online during a pandemic*. Given how relatively new COVID-era teaching is, we attribute the dearth of sources to the novelty of our new reality.

With that said, as each new COVID variant restarts the occasional talk of shutdowns and shifts to remote instruction, education researchers probably need to accept the end is not near for instructional challenges in the COVID era. Disheartening as it may be, reality is reality. Therefore, more research is needed in synchronous online instruction in a co-taught setting. While we do not claim to be offering any sort of groundbreaking call for research, nor do we claim to be experts in online instruction, we *do* believe the education field still needs to accept what has been placed in front of all of us as teachers.

Of course, as research increases on remote instruction, researchers must also be cognizant of what equity looks like in this setting. What happens when texts are primarily digital? What happens when students cannot access their right to a public education if they are not given subsidies for suitable Internet connectivity? What kinds of technological literacies do teachers *and* students bring to remote instruction? These are just some of the questions worth further consideration.

Conclusion

Make no mistake, synchronous online instruction was exhausting for both of us. We sincerely hope educators who share our experiences will recognize this

reality and join forces to uncover new ways of delivering engaging, equitable education that does not result in screen fatigue and isolation. Our profession has been lauded for its flexibility in the past (well, until we create book lists, but that is for another discussion), and it is time for that flexibility to foster creativity. Without that flexibility and creativity, teachers could run the risk of repeating a series of practices that do not yield new results.

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