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Socially Distant but Digitally Connected: How One Online Literacy Teacher Educator Responded to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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of it to their own courses as the pandemic continues to spread and other courses will likely be moved online.

Pedagogy Meets Practice: Moving to Online Format

I had taken several online courses throughout my own educational journey, so I know what good (and not-so-good) online instruction looks like. My teaching philosophy also played a role in how I approached the challenge of taking a conceptually dense course and transferring it to an online format. Teaching, for me, has always been about taking the complex and making it as simple as possible to ensure that *all* students can connect with the material. This was my approach as a high school English language arts and English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher for 13 years before I entered higher education, and this remains my approach now as a professor in the literacy and TESOL programs at my university. This approach may stem from my training in second language acquisition and Stephen Krashen's (2003) concept of *comprehensible input*, which simply implies that language learners (or the Krashenian term would likely be "acquirers") best understand concepts that are broken down into comprehensible, organized structures at their current language level and one level beyond that. This is Krashen's version of scaffolding, if you will, and aligns well with Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD).

In addition, I learned early on in my career to embrace my Type A personality fully, including my keen organizational skills. I firmly believe in order to be an effective online instructor, organization is key. Being technologically savvy is also a prerequisite to effective online teaching (Martin et al., 2019). I acknowledge that everyone is not organized (to the insane degree that I am) or necessarily technologically savvy. As such, my first line of advice to a faculty member who is transferring a class online would be to partner with an organized colleague who is willing to share some strategies for how they organize the materials, assignment guidelines, rubrics, etc. in their online courses. I would also recommend working closely with either a colleague whose resourcefulness with technology is several steps beyond yours or with the online learning/technical support department at your institution.

Course in Point: Literacy Theory and Pedagogy

Knowing how to break down complex information to make it more comprehensible, being organized, and possessing technological expertise are important in any teaching context, but they are especially important in online learning contexts. As an online instructor, I seek to present the complex material covered in my graduate-level literacy and TESOL courses in a format that is as comprehensible and easily digestible as possible. To illustrate this point, I will use

Literacy Theory and Pedagogy as an example. I have taught this course more than any other, now through 10 iterations, first as an adjunct and now as a full-time faculty member.

Course Structure and Textbook

For *Literacy Theory and Pedagogy*, I attempted to take what is undoubtedly conceptually dense and complex information concerning educational, reading/literacy, and linguistic theories and pedagogical approaches and break these complex theories down into three overarching categories: bottom-up, top-down, and interactive or balanced approaches to literacy instruction. I then set out to find a textbook that presented the theories covered in the course in the most comprehensible way possible. After multiple reviews of textbooks, I settled on *Lenses on Reading: An Introduction to Theories and Models* (Tracey & Morrow, 2017), published by Guilford Press. I chose *Lenses on Reading* first because of how it is organized but also because the authors present the highly complex concepts covered in a very straightforward manner. Students can read in-depth discussions from primary sources assigned for each module, but the textbook should be the place where students turn for clarity, not further confusion.

However, as with any textbook, the information was not organized exactly as I would have preferred. Therefore, I rearranged the order in which students read the chapters to more closely follow the arrangement of the categories mentioned above. The online modules and the assignments connected to them also paralleled this structure. I cannot stress the importance of ensuring that the textbook is appropriate to an online context and that the modules are carefully organized and designed to build on each other.

Structured Assignments

I organized the assignments to also align with this same structured organization. For the first assignment, students survey a wide range of theories to gain an overarching view of many of the theories that inform effective reading/literacy instruction. To accomplish this, students utilize a graphic organizer to summarize 10 different theories covered in the textbook. They then take this overview and begin to focus on two bottom-up (cognitive processing) and two top-down (constructivist) literacy theories they are interested in learning more about. After attending an intensive online/virtual presentation by a university research librarian on how to find and cite reputable research using the library's resources, students begin the process of researching the theories that they chose to explore. They write two extensive research papers, one on the bottom-up approach and one on the top-down approach to literacy instruction. The papers open with a brief review of the theories covered, including the major theorists and what problems gave rise to the theories. They are also required to conduct a short literature review (this is a

masters-level course) demonstrating how instructional practices aligned with the theories have been shown to positively affect students' literacy achievement. After becoming experts in both bottom-up and top-down theories of literacy instruction and writing their comprehensive reports, students then present (via video) what they consider to be the most effective methods of teaching literacy to their specific students and which theories and overarching theoretical paradigms inform those teaching methods and strategies. Because *Literacy Theory and Pedagogy* is often the first course students take in the M.Ed. reading/literacy education program, they often progress from knowing little or nothing about literacy theory or academic research and writing to being proficient to highly proficient in these areas by the end of the semester.

Student and Faculty Takeaways

Despite this being one of the most complex and rigorous courses students have ever taken, they routinely comment on how much they have gained from the process. For example, student comments on an informal end-of-course survey consistently highlighted the positive influence this course had on their learning and professional growth. I credit the organization and structured sequence of the modules and course assignments for this success and positive feedback. As a representative sample, three of my students' comments related to the course are included below:

- The assignments were clear, the semester well structured, and the assignments were meaningful. Instead of memorizing information, I was instead lead to multiple materials that helped me make my own opinion and form analytical impressions of the information presented.
- In all my college courses in my lifetime I genuinely feel like I learned and applied the information in this course the most. Learning about top-down and bottom-up theoretical approaches was powerful. However, the most powerful thing was learning the importance of know (*sic*) which one I believe in and why, then letting it drive my instruction.
- I loved the assigned text and I am planning on keeping the text. The text is designed well and I enjoyed how the professor planned activities for the chapters. I also liked how we did not have to read the chapters in order. I found this method to be very beneficial for my understanding of the theories and models.

As noted, I worked with several colleagues to get their courses online immediately following the university's closing because of the COVID-19 pandemic. I asked two colleagues to briefly reflect on *Literacy Theory and Pedagogy*, which I recommended as a template for online course design:

- The module design is consistent, and it only took about 30 minutes for me to understand how to engage in this course. The materials are competently built into [the online platform].
- The course was very well organized and consistent throughout.

Moving Forward

I would capture my experience tweaking and enhancing *Literacy Theory and Pedagogy* over the last five years as *socially distant but digitally connected*, which succinctly encapsulates my vision for taking a conceptually heavy course and adapting it to an online format without losing the quality of student learning, the rigor of the course, or the connectedness that comes with in-person learning. I have worked with other colleagues to follow similar processes with their own courses. One of the first myths I hear from colleagues is that online education lacks the quality or rigor of in-person instruction, a myth I immediately put to rest when I describe the resources available to enhance virtual interactions between professors and students and how rigorous my own online courses are.

Beyond that, my colleagues are pleased to hear about my own struggles—struggles similar to theirs—with adapting *Literacy Theory and Pedagogy* to an online format. If I can do it and my students can be successful, anyone can do it. The challenges are real during this pandemic, and these struggles are especially pronounced for teacher educators who have less experience with online teaching. I hope this short piece serves as a model for how these colleagues can work to transfer their courses online without sacrificing rigor or quality, and I also envision this piece serving as an impetus for those colleagues who already have extensive backgrounds in online teaching and learning to reach out to their less-initiated colleagues to actively support them during these challenging times.

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