



2020

## Alternative Delivery Methods: A Reflection on the Semester That Almost Wasn't

Joshua J. Anderson

University of Wisconsin-Platteville, [andersonjos@uwplatt.edu](mailto:andersonjos@uwplatt.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte>



Part of the Educational Methods Commons, Educational Technology Commons, Higher Education and Teaching Commons, Online and Distance Education Commons, and the Secondary Education and Teaching Commons

### Recommended Citation

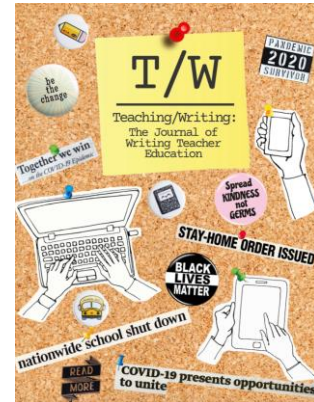
Anderson, Joshua J. (2020) "Alternative Delivery Methods: A Reflection on the Semester That Almost Wasn't," *Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte/vol9/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



## Alternative Delivery Methods: A Reflection on the Semester That Almost Wasn't



Joshua J. Anderson, *University of Wisconsin-Platteville*

*Classes canceled for next week; spring break extended.* That was it. That was the subject line of an email I received on March 13<sup>th</sup> notifying faculty and staff that we would be using “alternative delivery methods” as a means of instruction for a month. I recall nodding in agreement with the email’s optimistic message on the potential of resuming face-to-face instruction on April 14<sup>th</sup>, but today is the fifteenth of May, the final Friday of the semester, and I have not returned to my classrooms, my office, or the normally bustling commons areas of campus in over sixty days. And in that time, I, like so many other educators, have experienced a tremendous amount of success and failure while adjusting to the unprecedented demands of a new, hopefully temporary normal in education.

My colleagues and I were fortunate to have as much time as we did to prepare for remote instruction. With both the United States government and the state of Wisconsin declaring health emergencies on that fateful day in March because of COVID-19, the University of Wisconsin System granted us additional time to prepare for our transition to alternative delivery methods of instruction ahead of our scheduled spring break. A little luck with timing combined with the foresight of the university system provided a two-week window to prepare our courses for online learning.

As a university, we operate on the online learning platform CANVAS. As a system, we made a collective shift from D2L to CANVAS two years ago. I became a department lead and early adopter mentor, receiving advanced training and providing resources to colleagues during our transition and alignment periods. Previous trainings taught me that some faculty members would struggle adjusting to online instruction. If setting up a grade book and posting simple assignments felt like an insurmountable task to some, what was going to happen when they needed to provide synchronous learning experiences through a remote learning portal?

I suppose I can thank the old high school English teacher within me for staying ahead of the curve on technology training. I began my professional career as a middle school and high school English teacher in rural southwest Wisconsin, coaching football and adjudicating forensics. K-12 teachers are by necessity jacks of all trades, English language arts teachers especially. Not only are we responsible for two-thirds of the 3-R’s, but we happily become literary critics, media specialists, linguists, librarians, and guidance counselors. I am currently finishing my fourth year as a tenure-track professor, and like that high school English teacher long ago, I still wear many hats.

Housed within my university's English department, I teach two sections of College Writing each semester, alternating College Writing I and College Writing II between the fall and spring semesters respectively. As the English Education Program Coordinator, I teach a section of both Young Adult Literature and Grammar in Context during the fall and a section of Teaching Composition and Teaching English in Middle and Secondary Schools in the spring. On top of that, please add three committee appointments, a handful of student teachers to supervise each semester, and twenty-two advisees. So, I am writing this from the perspective of an English language arts methods instructor, a writing teacher educator, a university supervisor for clinical experiences, and an academic advisor.

My mindset to remote instruction quickly changed from it being a short-term Band-Aid used to slow the trickling academic slide our students found themselves to a full-on tourniquet within a matter of days following that initial email in March. I knew I had to continue to teach, not merely assign work, and model positive learning habits. The University's IT department quickly went to work integrating Zoom into my CANVAS courses, but the important consideration of providing either synchronous or asynchronous learning opportunities needed to be addressed. As faculty, we were given the choice. There were a number of factors that influenced my decision. While many of my colleagues were concerned about the online tools we had at our disposal to teach remotely, I knew the capabilities within CANVAS and Zoom would be more than enough to provide my students enriching educational experiences. My primary concern was how would my students be able to access course content, especially when it was clear they would not be returning to campus.

We are not a one-to-one university, so equitable access to instructional materials was at the forefront of my decision making process. Additionally, half of my students were first-year freshmen, and I knew many of them were still struggling to learn the very basics of CANVAS. I quickly sent out questionnaires determine how capable my students were to access online content in a safe and reliable working environment. The poll results were to be expected. Slightly less than 40% of my College Writing II students responded as having BOTH reliable Internet access AND a device to access the Internet, and of those students, only 70% said they felt safe/comfortable working from home. As a class we originally thought we might be able to work around this lack of access, but once public libraries and local businesses with Wi-Fi hotspots closed, I had to reassess my approach.

I decided to use an asynchronous approach to remote learning for my two sections of College Writing II. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday I would post a brief video introducing new writing concepts and approaches to composition using Zoom. Zoom's screen share technology allowed me to still perform write-alouds with my students and share a variety of multimedia content in order to model effective writing strategies. I cut back on the amount of content and focused on a core set of student learning outcomes I felt would benefit the students the most: demonstrating skills in problem-solving, distinguish between valid and invalid reasoning, develop critical reading skills, and apply rhetorical strategies in conjunction with audience expectations. CANVAS and Office 365 provided us with the necessary tools to engage in pre-writing, drafting, and revising activities, including peer review. This asynchronous model afforded students the flexibility to access

course content when it was convenient for them while still adhering to a series of soft and hard deadlines for their writing assignments. Zoom's waiting room feature also allowed me to establish virtual office hours and talk to my students one-on-one without having to create meetings on the fly. Although most students told me they preferred face-to-face instruction, they did enjoy the flexibility of the asynchronous model, and they found the virtual office hours to be convenient opportunities to have questions answered without having to wait for me to respond an email.

The students in my two upper-division courses, Teaching Composition and Teaching English in Middle and Secondary Schools, had a much different experience with remote learning. Every student had access to course content in a safe environment, so we proceeded with a synchronous learning model. We met virtually two days a week during our normally scheduled times, and I held additional virtual office hours. At their foundation, these courses encourage a consideration of theory to provide pre-service teachers with a greater understanding of *how* students learn, rather than emerge with a bag of tricks to use in the classroom. However, despite all of the positives that our online learning platforms had, the shift to remote learning significantly impacted our transactional learning experiences. There is a need for real communication in our methods courses, talking and sharing our perceptions while working together collaboratively on many occasions. My students and I constantly found ourselves talking over one another or forgetting to unmute ourselves or getting video bombed by barking dogs and screaming kids. It was the closest experience I've ever had in my career to students sitting in rows and raising their hands to speak. So, we adjusted. We distanced ourselves from the theoretically texts we would normally discuss and focused on situated learning through meaningful activities while practicing reflection in order to make informed choices about assumptions regarding teaching and learning.

COVID-19 forced educators across the world to rethink approaches to education. When we departed campus my methods courses were on the verge of entering local classrooms and working with K-12 students while also teaching lessons to their peers in our classroom. No longer having the capability to have direct contact with K-12 students, my pre-service teachers established professional learning communities to learn how to successfully integrate technology in the classroom that would encourage student-centered projected-based learning. Becoming "experts" in their newfound platforms, they taught their peers how the technology could be utilized in an English language arts classroom and thoughtfully explored the opportunities and barriers these digital tools bring to the classroom. These experiences proved to be valuable learning opportunities. The School of Education eventually established virtual tutoring sessions toward the end of the semester, pairing pre-service teaches with local K-12 students. Many of my students became tutors and were thrilled to use these technologies with their tutees.

Despite all of the successes my students and I had together there were just as many failures: lost lecture videos, forgotten assignments, dropped Zoom calls, and a general decrease in student engagement as the stresses of the semester reached their peak. And of course, we have many questions to answer as we move forward into the summer and fall semesters. What will education look like if we continue with alternatively delivery methods of

instruction? What concessions need to be made if we return to face-to-face instruction? What have we learned from this experience that we can use to improve both online and in-person learning? I will be teaching two courses over the summer. My university has determined that all summer courses will be taught asynchronously to provide students with the greatest amount of flexibility despite anecdotal evidence suggesting they prefer the structure synchronous learning models provide. Adjustments to the fall semester, including changes to start and end dates, are also currently under review.

I'm thankful that I've had the last two months to test my own limitations with the application of remote learning methods, and I intend to use the next two months to explore how these digital tools can be effectively used to help English language learners. I was scheduled to travel to South Central University for Nationalities in Wuhan, China in July to work with students enrolled in our Master of Science in English education program. Differentiation is a powerful tool for ESL teachers, providing a wide range of learning opportunities for students with different academic and linguistic needs, but how much differentiation can be provided through remote learning? I was already concerned with working with a group of students with varying English speaking and writing abilities and cultural identities in a face-to-face setting. Now I will be taking on these challenges with the added challenges remote learning present to the development of interpersonal relationships.

And that is my biggest concern moving forward. What will happen to my love of teaching and my students' love of learning if I am unable to develop a more personal approach to instruction to bridge the digital divide between my students and myself? But I'm not going to spend my waking hours contemplating *what ifs*. What I will do is invest my time and energy into researching, designing, and implementing as many differentiated learning approaches to remote instruction that lead to an increase in student engagement. It is my hope that we can all draw the courage, insights, and inspiration we need in order to continue onward during these very uncertain times, and I look forward to the day that my students and I can return to the classroom.