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Critical Thinking During a Pandemic

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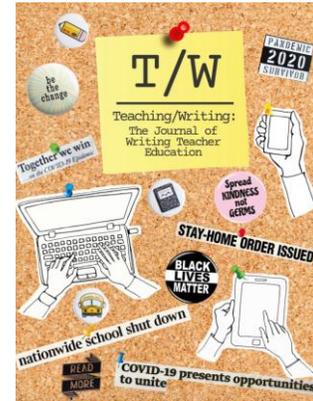
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Critical Thinking During a Pandemic



Cheryl Comeau-Kirschner, *Borough of Manhattan Community College*

“Why does the President talk about medicines then?”

One of the *Brady Bunch* squares lit up in our Zoom class meeting, and it was one of my most outspoken students. She posed a thoughtful question as we reviewed an excerpt from our textbook chapter about experts and evidence. I paused for a moment to see if any other boxes would light up. Then, finally another one did: *“The doctor is the expert with evidence to talk about it.”* I marveled at the slow flickering of other boxes lighting up one by one, and sometimes, simultaneously. It was a small victory but a meaningful turning point in a critical thinking course for English language learners that had become increasingly quiet over time.

Before distance learning became a necessity, my students saw each other in a typical community college classroom three times a week. As a challenging co-requisite course for advanced ESL composition students, my department limits the class roster to 25 students, but this semester had only 10 students. I recall that it felt a bit smaller than I usually like; I love the vibrancy, and frankly unpredictability, of interactions among students with varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds. A full class roster was well-suited to my facilitative approach in which ELLs were always encouraged to take risks in the target language by debating points, trying out critical thinking vocabulary, attempting to use a newly learned idiom, etc. and do so without feeling self-conscious about the accuracy of their expression; instead, we focused on building a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) where fluency of expression bolstered how we communicated our thinking processes to each other. When we hit the sweet spot of a true community of practice, it became a learner-centered environment that promoted students’ self-efficacy and metacognitive awareness to direct much of the discussion about course content and continuously monitor their own performance.

But distance learning had changed everything. All of a sudden, 10 students felt like too many in our first couple of Zoom sessions. The shift was so abrupt and so unsettling for the world-at-large and for our little corner within it. They looked to me for answers, and I had few to offer as I tried to keep some semblance of normalcy while my husband engaged in his own constant Zoom sessions and my

daughter spent lonely school days attached to her computer in our New York City apartment that is best described as “cozy.” The quiet emanating from those *Brady Bunch* squares was deafening. My students didn’t want to take as many risks in English because they were worried about too much now. Yet we were still together even in those quiet moments, and that seemed to matter because we all still showed up; I always had an email reminder to tell me that participants were waiting for me to launch the meeting.

So, the beginning of class warm-up became the daily check-in about how they were feeling, what they were watching on the news, what they read on the internet, what rumor they heard from a family member, or any random topic that entered their minds. We read excerpts from textbook chapters that could tie into those seemingly haphazard musings so that they hopefully saw how critical thinking was really just a good life skill. We began to work on textbook chapter practice exercises together because they were sometimes too distracted to finish the homework on their own. Our essay writing process morphed into time spent in Zoom “breakout rooms” among themselves and/or with me, and those exchanges mirrored brainstorming, outlining, and peer reviewing in a way that still accomplished the course learning outcomes. Our class tutor worked with each student virtually via a program called Upswing, and she began sending update emails to me since we could no longer engage in post-class discussions over a cup of coffee.

On the day that the President Trump pressed Dr. Fauci to step aside at a briefing, my student had just finished writing some notes about the definition of an “expert.” Then, she turned on the news, and saw Dr. Fauci off to the side of the podium with his hand over a furrowed brow. Finally, she noticed it was time for our Zoom class session, so she logged in and waited for me to launch the meeting.

We had our daily check-in as had become our routine practice. Next, it was time to share definitions about what it means to be an expert. When it was her turn, I expected her contribution to be thorough and thoughtful in the usual manner. She pointedly asked, “*Why does the President talk about medicines then?*” The quiet boxes began to light up, and we began to rebuild a new community of practice.

Rebuilding meant that I had to accept organized chaos as a new mantra. We educators love to plan, and our carefully crafted syllabi reflect our dedication to this ethos. We may be flexible in the moment when a student says something intriguing, but the plan for the day or the week hovers in our minds so that we trace back to where we started or intended to go. We are masters of redirection when things go off track. But a global pandemic has changed our best laid plans. Some of us are trying so hard to maintain productivity within the structure of all these plans.

However, the most productive plan may be the one that provides room for teachable moments that emerge not just from a discipline but from the hearts and minds of the students who have experienced this pandemic side-by-side with educators. Our syllabi can provide a baseline for the course, but maybe it's time to let students reframe course work and class interactions based on their sense of our new normal. For example, encourage students to develop their own code of conduct and "action plans" to help them express their evolving worldview or personal goals; they can evaluate arguments and reasoning from resources in their daily lives rather than just our assigned academic readings; they can record a digital story about a day in their not-so-typical life and/or allow the space to incorporate other activities or assignments that enable them to co-facilitate the direction of the course with you.

Ultimately, as these times twist and turn in uncertain ways, I believe that we should chart a new path together rather than providing a plan that students must simply follow.

Reference

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge university press.