Today Is the Tomorrow We Should Have Prepared for Yesterday: Rebuilding Our Classrooms to Facilitate Student-Centered, Teacher-Sustaining, Tech-Supported Education

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The spring of 2020 was difficult. ELA teachers and students learned that we can do hard things; parents and teachers rallied to support one another for the sake of students and their learning as we fought to preserve the best of what schooling has to offer. Throughout the summer, we anxiously doomscrolled through coronavirus updates while anticipating the big decision: online, hybrid, or in-person schooling. It was not surprising that we entered the 2020 school year with tremendous anxiety about teaching in uncertain and shifting modes as technology became the primary vector of instruction—the space of classroom engagement.

In truth, middle level ELA teachers haven't fully engaged with the process of supporting online and distance learning in a way that supports the social, intellectual, and relational opportunities of middle school at scale (Marlatt, 2020). That process would require coordination far beyond the walls of the classroom, including preparing preservice and practicing teachers for online pedagogies and preparing doctoral students and institutions of higher education to adopt best practices as they move to online and hybrid environments. As became obvious when school bus drivers became the vectors for school lunch and homework delivery, it will mean creating and sustaining the infrastructure needed (e.g., high speed Internet, access to devices, and skills) to make this transition a reality. The quarantines required to protect public health highlighted serious class divides between the haves and the have-nots in our society (Scheiber et al., 2020) and uneven experiences with teaching in virtual modes.

As teachers and researchers who experiment with the use of multimodal assignments and assessments, we posit that brick-and-mortar teaching has always been a multimodal enterprise. Teachers call on complex processes of multimodal instruction and assessment when we "read the room" for confusion or comprehension, when we provide instructions both verbally and in writing, and when we facilitate opportunities for students to leverage their artistic and dramatic skills to engage with content. We are already multimodal teachers and learners (Kress, 2010).

But that multimodality takes on a number of different features in a digital environment. "Reading the room" in zoom looks different than it does in person. The hum of an actively engaged group of eighth graders sounds different in Google Classroom. Finding time for casual conversation—so important to relationship building—requires rethinking the instructional minute (Marlatt, 2019). The isolation prompted by pandemic conditions poses a real danger to young adolescents. As educators, we must focus on how we can use this crisis to re-center what we know to be most valuable about education: the peer and mentor relationships that underpin students' learning and the opportunities to pursue meaningful social and intellectual goals. We must draw on the multiple modes we always use in teaching to better understand the ethics and affordances of teaching in virtual spaces. Based on our experiences as teacher educators, we offer these four guidelines for teaching across in-person and virtual environments.

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Actively Problematize Pedagogy and Tools

"Business as usual" no longer has a place in our 2020 landscape of virtual teaching and learning. The days of copying over robotic discussion board prompts on Schoology from the previous term or uploading the

same asynchronous lecture videos scripting out answers to quiz prompts in Google Classroom are long gone and with good reason. We no longer have the luxury, or the right, to simply recreate tired tropes that have been exposed for their lack of ingenuity, innovation, and inclusivity. We must be even more critical about how and in what ways we engage our students, the privacy and security of the platforms through which we interact, and our navigation of human connections within digital spaces (McDermott et al., 2019). The pandemic has turned many familiar aspects of teaching upside down, but is that necessarily a bad thing? It may depend on the kinds of questions we ask ourselves and the ways we challenge one another moving forward.

Our experience supervising teacher candidates during the pandemic suggests that the transition to emergency remote teaching went much more smoothly when the mentor teachers were already using digital tools to facilitate classroom activities. And many were not. Instructional technologies should have had much more of an impact on ELA instruction before the pandemic. Some still rely on pedagogies, texts, and practices from earlier generations even when technology (and support) is readily available. In literacy education, technology and digital literacy is more often identified as something that is not as important as in other areas (Cassidy et al., 2019).

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And yet, as we move to adopt these technologies, there is a need to question what data is collected and aggregated from middle level students and teachers who leave digital footprints when they interact with these tools, spaces, and apps (McDermott, 2018). There is a need to question ownership and intellectual property of content created by educators and students as they interact in virtual spaces. Students and educators need to be able to build a domain of their own by openly sharing content outside of the district and using whatever tools are made available for the users (O'Byrne & Pytash, 2017). Educational institutions should not ignore data mining especially when a new platform is heralded as a "solution" and should not jump on the bandwagon blindly just because other educational organizations use it.

Prioritize Community

The impact of the SARS-CoV2 pandemic exposes an almost collective negligence when considering instructional technologies and their use. While emergency remote teaching continues, and we consider the social and pedagogical uses of technology post-coronavirus, we need a plan to support middle schools as they prepare for online course design and delivery in a post-pandemic society. Online teachers still need that "village" of support (Rice, 2012) from administrators, counselors, course designers, and curriculum specialists. Teachers need to establish a social presence via the Internet (Khan et al., 2017) while facilitating teacher-student interaction, student-content interaction, and student-student interaction (Ko & Rossen, 2017; Online Learning Consortium, 2016). We need a plan for differentiation that's better than posting recorded lectures and discussion prompts. We need a plan that matches the technology to the task while considering how learners who have limited access can be successfully engaged (Buabeng-Andoh, 2012).

In short, perhaps the best guidance in this moment is to focus on an ethics of care and prioritize humans first. Smith (2020) suggests five ways to keep human connections:

- Simplify and be flexible
- Don't assume people have reliable tech, or understand how to use it
- Look for ways to build community
- Don't be afraid to crowdsource ideas
- Keep the big picture in mind

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As our schools, communities, and systems close down, we cannot assume that technology will supplant all of the elements that make us human beings. We need to be intentional in our uses of technology. We need to advocate for privacy, security, and more informed uses of our data in these spaces (O'Byrne, 2019). Together we can use this as an opportunity to forge a future for all that is more accessible and approachable.

By remixing and rethinking pedagogy, educators can learn and play with students as we collectively chart out the future of our classrooms.

Explain the *Why*

Every teacher has had that student—the one who wants to question the value of every activity. Let's start considering these students a gift. They verbalize what many in the classroom might be thinking and what some may lack vocabulary to articulate, which is incredibly useful for teachers. They prompt us to help all learners forge connections between the classroom and the social worlds beyond it. For both virtual and multimodal activities, it is important to explain the *why*. Why are we acting out this play? Why are we drawing scenes from the novel? Why are we creating a playlist? Why do I have to respond to my peers in the discussion board? Why do we include an image or a meme with every post? After years of teaching, it's easy for us to imagine that students implicitly grasp the "whys" of our lessons. Those reasons may have become instinctual for us, but they are often news to our students. We owe them an explanation.

We have to understand and explain not just the pedagogical reasons for texts, activities, and assessments, but also the reasons for tools and procedures. And in virtual and middle school classrooms, even more so. What tools are we using to make our lessons accessible and to keep student data safe? What procedures are in place to ensure their privacy? How have we planned to address potential inequities? What support will be provided by K–12 administrators from the department level to the state level? How will colleges and universities support professors who guide preservice teachers? And, critically, why is it important to ask (and answer) all these questions?

Learn with Students

Creating an active learning environment in which young adolescents are in charge poses a number of challenges. It demands letting go of familiar scripts and opening the possibility for new texts. It means expanding learning goals that focus on student inquiry and interest instead of predetermined outcomes (Hicks et al., 2020). It conflicts with the hierarchical nature of schooling, where teachers are routinely evaluated on how well they get students to comply. It involves risk, mistakes, and failure. But it also creates a classroom environment that sustains the curiosity and engagement of both the students and the teacher (hooks, 2003).

Building sustainable practices in middle level classrooms means reimagining not just the roles of "student" and "teacher," but also educating students in the academic and personal uses of technology that permeate society. Schools have traditionally emphasized the use of tools like whiteboards, overhead projectors, three-ring binders, and composition books. As the Internet changes all aspects of society, we regularly encounter screens, social networks, and blogs. For the most part, these two versions of literacy practices do not intersect. To prepare learners for the challenges of the modern world, we must make intentional instructional decisions that empower students to encode and decode meaning through the roles of producer and recipient or reader and writer as found in online informational contexts (O'Byrne, 2014). This provides an opportunity to move beyond simply "reading" content as we empower learners to become potentially innovative "writers" of new media themselves.

Through the integration of new and digital literacies, computer-supported collaborative learning identifies a pedagogical approach in which this collaboration—or the social act involved in learning—takes place using a computer or the Internet as a mediating space (Jeong & Hmelo-Silver, 2016). When integrated with play-oriented instruction, teachers have a chance to learn with students and find time for creative thinking and open inquiry (Yang & Chang, 2013). Such pedagogical structuring supports the development of improved cognitive flexibility and helps students learn to cope when faced with novel and unprecedented challenges (Lima et al., 2004). By remixing and rethinking pedagogy, educators can learn and play with students as we collectively chart out the future of our classrooms.

Build a Better Future

As a society, we are facing complicated questions regarding changes in education, technology, and literacy practices. Despite increased access to digital tools through mobile technologies, we know that a digital divide exists based on racial, ethnic, and rural/non-rural

lines (Anderson & Perrin, 2016). What impact does this have on the expectations of a minimally adequate education when we go virtual and all students and educators cannot connect?

As we move to a virtual schoolhouse, we need to also consider the separation between online and offline worlds as a form of "digital dualism" (Jurgenson, 2012). As educators, do we view these as separate spaces, do we consider making one resemble the other, or do we craft new possibilities? We currently seem prepared to create false dichotomies and boundaries between learning in an online world, and hope for a day when we head back to an offline or physical world. This mindset is misguided; sociologist Zeynep Tufekci (2014) expressed these challenges concisely by stating, "In fact, the Internet is not a world, it's part of the world" (p. 14).

As new digital and social technologies become ubiquitous in society, there is often a certain amount of negotiation or hesitation as we adjust to these texts, tools, and spaces. Despite the transformative possibilities associated with the inclusion of the Internet and other communication technologies, success depends on collaborative efforts between districts to provide technology and administrators who should provide time for professional development for practicing and preservice teachers. For the young adolescents in our classrooms and the teachers who guide them, understanding how best to leverage these digital and web literacies in our work is central to our collective future.

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