Reconceptualizing Distance and Time in Effective Literacy Instruction

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Key Words**: Asynchronous, synchronous, shared documents, collaboration, discussion**

Abstract

Good pedagogy is flexible and varied, responsive to the evolving learning needs of students. When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted K-16 teaching and learning practices in early 2020, exacerbating social inequalities such as technological literacy affordances, teachers shared best practices and offered digital teaching professional development—for instance, the use of screen captures, instructional videos, PowerPoint voiceovers, student podcasts, recording and editing Zoom discussions, the living syllabus model, HiFlex design, text-messaging apps, Screencast-O-Matic guides, and dynamic breakout groups (see TLPDC). Although online teaching scholarship is extensive and several decades long, many of us pivoted to remote distance learning quickly, and we discovered that given adequate time to prepare to teach and work with students online, the pedagogy could be quite strong. "Going remote" is different than distance learning, of course, where one is often impromptu and the other affords more planning time. Whatever we want to call it—the "new normal," post-pandemic pedagogy, getting back to the classroom—we have opportunities ahead, including being online by choice with new understanding (Moore & Barbour, 2023). What worked well before the pandemic, and what we developed while working online by demand, can be blended to rethink distance and time to optimize praxis...

Introduction

Good pedagogy is flexible and varied, responsive to the evolving learning needs of students. When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted K-16 teaching and learning practices in early 2020, exacerbating social inequalities such as technological literacy affordances, teachers shared best practices and offered digital teaching professional development—for instance, the use of screen captures, instructional videos, PowerPoint voiceovers, student podcasts, recording and editing Zoom discussions, the living syllabus model, HiFlex design, text-messaging apps, Screencast-O-Matic guides, and dynamic breakout groups (see TLPDC). Although online teaching scholarship is extensive and several decades long, many of us pivoted to remote distance learning quickly, and we discovered that given adequate time to prepare to teach and work with students online, the pedagogy could be quite strong. "Going remote" is different than distance learning, of course, where one is often impromptu and the other affords more planning time. Whatever we want to call it—the "new normal," post-pandemic pedagogy, getting back to the classroom—we have opportunities ahead, including being online by choice with new understanding (Moore & Barbour, 2023). What worked well before the pandemic, and what we developed while working online by demand, can be blended to rethink distance and time to optimize praxis.

The return to onsite instruction post-pandemic included an expanded pedagogical experience where more of us employed better distance learning strategies and practices, including the use of AI and related ethical concerns (Cicchino & Hicks, 2024; Duin & Pedersen, 2023; Laquintano, Schnitzler, & Vee, 2023; Moore & Barbour, 2023). Applying online praxis in onsite contexts involves rethinking delivery modalities. Where "synchronous" involves communicating at the same time, and "asynchronous" refers to communicating at different times, teachers can connect the two in meaningful ways (see Newbold on transactional writing instruction). Rob Jenkins (2021), for instance, recently related such a discovery in The Chronicle of Higher Education: "after making the sudden pivot to a virtual classroom last spring, [. . .] teaching online is a lot more like 'actual teaching' than I had anticipated" (para. 4). Jenkins discusses asynchronous strategies he developed during remote teaching that he plans to use in future instruction, offering students digital access and more avenues to voice perspective, more opportunities to communicate through a variety of modalities, and more choices given varied learning styles. We must consider offering both synchronous and asynchronous modes of learning in more integrated ways to facilitate teacher-student, student-student, and student-content interaction and engagement, and to better prepare our students for increasingly dynamic and fluid workplace demands.

We can combine the synchronous and the asynchronous. For instance, some students might be ready to engage synchronously online or in onsite settings, and gain voice and empowerment through doing so. Other students might engage better asynchronously after working with the content awhile, considering others' viewpoints, and drafting and refining ideas before communicating. Such instruction is potentially more empathetic and might give more opportunity to analyze content for misinformation; for instance, consider strategies to better integrate co-curricular instruction, such as study abroad, wherein the a/synchronous can become perceived as lived experience or actual teaching and learning. We must consider medium and message as well as content validity and reliability.

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We can reconceptualize distance and time to expand access and offer blended and ideally more inclusive learning opportunities that can help students become more media literate. Paul Mihailidis (2019) underscores the idea that access is a fundamental right and teaching students principles of media literacy through meaningful participation with a variety of platforms is critical, working toward a classroom of students "engaging in a diversity of voices" (p. 7). Access (and lack thereof), as we saw broadly during the pandemic, is critical to ensure stakeholders can engage and interact effectively (see GSOLE, the Global Society of Online Literacy Educators at https://www.gsole.org). Online literacy includes digital reading, writing, and media skills. Connecting the synchronous and asynchronous by design in online and onsite classes helps our students understand they are producing and sharing ideas in the world toward a common good, what Mihailidis and many media literacy theorists refer to as "civic intentionality" (p. 13), working toward ethnorelative global citizenship. We are always co-authors stepping into ongoing conversations that happen both synchronously and asynchronously in person and at a distance. To be media literate is to be aware of the impact of bias and subjectivity in these ongoing conversations, the merging of persuasive and informative rhetoric, and the uncovering of something that may be reliable yet invalid. Blended modalities can help students develop such literacy skills in our networked society (Kali, Baram-Tsabari, & Schejter, 2019). By using both the synchronous and asynchronous, we can teach students to embrace converging information flows through engagement and empowering social responsibility (Appadurai, 1996; Jones et al., 2021), practicing empathy and developing divergent perspectives in an increasingly connected global society (Bennett, 2017).

Distance

The "distance," thus, in distance learning has less to do with location and more to do with literacy itself. Literacy is fluency in something, whether in language or facility with a medium or technology. Literacy is voice and conviction and confidence, stepping into an ongoing conversation. As Stephen Kucer (2014) writes in Dimensions of Literacy: A Conceptual Base for Teaching Reading and Writing in School Settings, "limiting our understanding of literacy to the linguistic and cognitive dimensions [. . .] is to overlook the social dimension of written language" (p. 229). Understanding how to communicate effectively when "distance" is ever-shifting is a critical skill we should design for. Borgman and McArdle (2019), in their book on resources and strategies for online writing instructors, highlight ways in which teachers should focus their instructional design with the personal, accessible, responsive, and strategic, what they call the *PARS* approach. And Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst (2021) in *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* state, "writing well means entering into conversation with others," actively entering dialectic rather than passively absorbing information (p. xiii). Such dialectical engagement must include determining the best means and sequencing of communication, which is an approach to algorithmic literacy that teachers using AI to generate ideas are exploring, wherein AI becomes an "authentic" audience that can be engaged (Laquintano, Schnitzler, & Vee, 2023). With digital tools we can work to facilitate individualized instruction within ongoing collaborations to underline the importance of studying relationships between the reader, writer, text, location, and modality as a key component of media literacy.

That is, our students must be prepared to write for a variety of ever-changing situations understanding the importance of the expanded rhetorical triangle, and teachers should highlight the complexity of the writing environments for which we must prepare. In our courses we teach students to think about relationships between the reader, the writer, and the text. When one thing changes, such as the reader, then the other two elements of the triangle must change. But distance and time increases the complexity of audience and purpose by way of location and modality. The rhetorical triangle must be expanded to be more three-dimensional, including reader, writer, text, location, and modality, giving students preparation to practice social dimensions of written language. Moore and Barbour (2023) refer to this as the modality principle, that "humans learn best when extraneous or

distracting information is removed" (p. 172). If a composition is to be read by a multinational audience, on different devices, while heading to a meeting, or not really read carefully at all, consideration of audience and purpose and what is "extraneous" changes. Increasingly, for instance, we tell students that readers want to accomplish a task after reading our compositions rather than spend too much time reading them. That's a core principle of workplace writing, and it changes how we teach writing (see Tebeaux & Dragga, 2021). Literacy instruction should be situated alongside the messy power constructions of society, which is sometimes onsite and sometimes online, sometimes live and often not. Our compositions should be balanced with cognitive, behavioral, and effective engagement to achieve academic and communicative effectiveness (Borup et al., 2020, p. 816, as cited in Moore & Barbour, 2023, p. 93).

Distance learning scholarship working toward such balances is robust (see *The Bedford Bibliography of Research in Online Writing Instruction*, which is organized according to the CCCC position statement of effective online writing instruction practices). Quality Matters (2018), for instance, is a very useful tool for teachers making suggestions to administrators regarding digital tools: "the global organization leading quality assurance in online and innovative digital teacher and learning environments. It provides a scalable quality assurance system for online and blended learning used within and across organizations" ("Press Release"). See also Hewett and DePew's (2015) *Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction on principles of online writing instruction, professional development, accessibility, and multilingual writers in online environments*. There is less distance between people who are reflectively engaged remotely over a topic than there is between people face to face who do not interact well or who fail to step into the conversation effectively. Engagement comes from empathy, close attention to the ongoing conversation, and by weaving the right threads together to make meaning.

Navigating distance requires experience conveying meaningful thought through virtual environments, practicing a matured ability to express voice and opinion empathically without dismissing others' perspectives. Skills needed to use technology effectively to express self accurately and responsibly are challenging to teach in any learning environment. Mary Stewart's (2021) webtext "Student-Teacher Conferencing in Zoom" documents her shift to online teaching that resulted in enhancing both her online and onsite praxis along these lines. She offers two case studies of teacher-student conferences on Zoom, examining ways in which digital space impacts what can be taught and learned. Real-time affordances might offer some momentum toward voice for some students and can motivate learners to move toward asynchronous deep reflection and focus. The interface creates a sense of distance that can be helpful for students, enabling them to feel as if they're on the same playing field, a distance that "seems productive for the type of trial-and-error digital literacy" that some students need (Stewart, "Discussion").
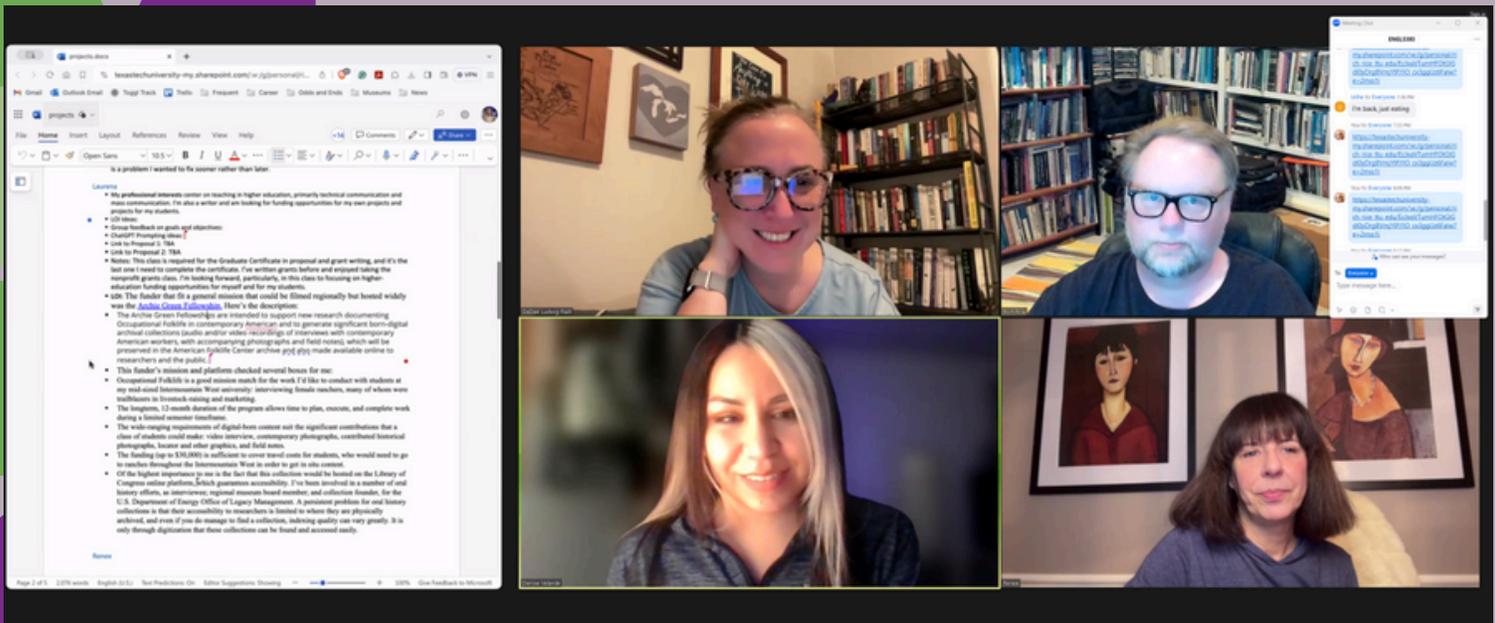
Time

Because bridging distance between perspectives online requires a facility with empathy and available modalities, a value system and skillset that varies widely amongst students, time is needed to scaffold distance. "Time" in online teaching and learning environments has less to do with the progress of events from past to present to future than it does in offering students opportunities to work at their own pace with preferred tools to arrive at a satisfactory level of understanding and achievement. What's important for teachers is that students achieve the goals and objectives of a lesson, unit, or course, and learn how to balance factors impacting effective conversations. How they go about doing that is less consequential. For instance, how might students use AI to generate ideas for effective communication? At what stage in their process is AI best employed? It may take some students a lot of time, and some students may develop the right combination of prompting and content generation more readily; time has less to do with the clock and more to do with understanding. In technical communication workplace writing situations, where "no one wants to read what you've written" (Tebeaux & Dragga, 2021), readers, instead, want to accomplish tasks. They want to read something and then

go do something else. That means strategies a writer can employ, like data visualization, bullet points and subheadings, and using informative rather than persuasive rhetoric, can facilitate understanding and action resulting from reading. Readers can achieve goals and objectives more readily when we take
the approach that what's important is clarity in support of accomplishing tasks. Time shifts to achieving purpose.

Making Connections

In my online, onsite, and hybrid classes I have developed several strategies that combine the synchronous and asynchronous to teach students that writing must step into and extend an ongoing conversation, paying close attention to what might be extraneous information, to aid in users accomplishing tasks. Thinking through what an audience knows and needs to know is critical, as well as how best to generate, refine, and distribute that information. For instance, students can be asked to login to Zoom or another meeting tool, form breakout groups, and simultaneously interact between these small teams in a Google Doc (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Online a/synchronous hybrid teaching environment.

In other words, a small group can interact synchronously, and many small groups can interact in a largely asynchronous modality at the same time. Students can voice perspectives in groups using video, audio, and chat, if they wish, as well as develop content in the Google Doc together and individually, while observing other groups as they produce content in the shared document. Seeing ideas from other groups form offers live modeling and a balance of stepping into ongoing conversations. In this reconceptualized way, the impact of distance and time can be highlighted and addressed.

For instance, in the shared document students can find and create prompts for their group. They might use AI to help them generate new tactical and strategic lines in their compositions, answer those prompts solely themselves, and refine AI response. Members of the full class work in the same document while discussing their ideas in different Zoom small groups. On one monitor I can open the shared Google Doc, offering questions and additional prompts to each group on the fly as each group progresses in their thinking. Or a team can share the Google Doc through Zoom on their screens. On another monitor, I can jump into a group and work with students through video, audio, and text if they seem to need a specific type of support. Switching between groups as an

instructor is quick and seamless, paying close attention to ongoing progress of interactions in the Google Doc. For instance, in either the Google Doc or in a group's meeting, I might ask clarifying questions such as "what would a primary claim be here?" Or, "how could I sustain this idea in other contexts?" I usually copy and paste some questions for all groups, and I offer unique questions for specific groups as appropriate. I might offer a nudge in the Google Doc or in Zoom, "what might we use to prompt ChatGPT to come up with more categories of information here?" I use this in composition, in technical communication classes, and in other courses. In some ways the Google Doc emulates an asynchronous environment, one that students can be encouraged to refine their thinking in and after class individually and as a group; the small group space in Zoom emulates a synchronous board room meeting or agile team scrum. Another thing I find valuable here is students have multiple venues for engaging and participating, depending on an identified need for stepping into a conversation, sharing their voice and identity and perspective in one of several ways, either synchronously or asynchronously. As students move toward completing the current task, I ask groups to offer responses to other groups on the Google Doc, and then I bring the class back together to the main Zoom room by closing the groups and reflecting over lessons learned, asking team representatives to share findings synchronously. In terms of engagement, opportunity is varied, flexible, and agile: students can interact with the teacher, peers, and/or content in a scaffolded asynchronous space or synchronously through video, audio, and/or chat. I also ask students to comment on the Google Doc after class, perhaps providing additional prompts or asking for revision of content shared after reviewing writing more thoroughly. Some students have less time after class and prefer to share their ideas synchronously; others prefer to conceptualize and refine thinking over time. Combining synchronous and asynchronous exchanges by sharing the same Google Doc to individual groups is a native online pedagogical technique that can be done in an onsite or hybrid environment, as well, if students have access. In addition to reader, writer, and text, students must consider location and modality when composing; that is, whether to build on synchronous affordances or asynchronous to make meaning, and in the context of individual, group, class, or some combination thereof.

Typically, students will choose a modality or approach to manifesting thinking into writing in a way with which they're most familiar. Sometimes I ask them to try something new and then to write about differences and why one approach may work better given different communication situations. How might students combine the a/synchronous to develop thesis statements in a first-year writing course, bouncing ideas off readers both synchronously and asynchronously? Rather than here's my idea, the writing also must stand for itself.

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What about developing a set of instructions for a class in interactive design? Sometimes those instructions need time for user testing, and other times students can move faster toward their purpose with synchronous interaction. A course in website design might require the use of different modalities for such testing. And in graduate courses in composition theory, where students are asked to synthesize a variety of texts to determine different perspectives, students might benefit from relaying their ideas based on readings and experience, review others' experiences, and refer to the Google Doc later to develop even more fully. I use a/synchronous approaches when teaching grant writing courses, as well, especially when students are using AI to help them formulate the most effective goals, objectives, tasks, and sustainability ideas. Students often then use combinations of working documents, AI Summary, and video/audio with clients.

What's clear is that many of our students graduate with skills in persuasion, with an understanding of grammar and style, and with some understanding of good research and audience awareness, but without appropriate and

emerging media literacy skills they are potentially functionally illiterate. Students must be taught how to determine what is reliable and valid across many different media platforms, which in turn will help them reflect over dangers resulting from sharing misinformation. Students need several sorts of literacies: intercultural communication competence, media literacy, algorithmic literacy, and understanding situation and optimal ways to step into and extend conversations with empathy and engagement. Such informed and situated literacies embrace an understanding of an expanded rhetorical triangle that includes our attention to relationships between reader, writer, text, location, and modality. The medium and the message are the message. As we strengthen our teaching by embracing digital technologies in different ways, reimagining how "distance" and "time" can work in our classes, combining synchronous and asynchronous pedagogical strategies can give learners a variety of opportunities for engaging with content, with other students, and with teachers. Doing so underscores the idea that effective communication steps into a conversation rather than simply pushes one claim over another.

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