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Emerging From a Pandemic: The Evolution of the Classroom *Victoria Leggett, Taylor Stanley, and Daniel Shirey*

The initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic left the world in a survival mode, and public schools were no exception. Mandates of mass quarantine ended most in-person social experiences and emptied classrooms. The education system was unprepared for the challenges presented by quarantine, yet adapted quickly. As classrooms morphed to a solely virtual realm, education technology and diverse instructional strategies evolved to compensate. Pre-pandemic, telecommunication from students to teachers was a rarity, but quarantine caused it to be a necessity.

Although in-person learning has largely returned in the 2021–2022 academic year, some educators are still in a survival mode. In addition to weathering the constant hurdles that teaching presents, we face the short- and long-term effects of the pandemic, such as a deficiency of necessary social or communication skills or the above-average rate of absences due to continual individual quarantines. As teachers slowly emerge from the effects of the pandemic, we must take the opportunity to reflect on our experiences. Through examining all that has occurred and the residual effects, we can discern what worked

during the quarantine, what didn't, and what improvements should be actualized.

We have noticed a deficit in communication skills increasing with the duration of the pandemic. In an effort to bolster this stunted progress, there should be a concentration on literacy-based education, enacted in classrooms regardless of standard disciplinary boundaries. As early career and pre-service teachers, it feels somewhat audacious to point out current classroom issues and to speculate about possible improvements. However, our unique circumstances give us insight because we observed classrooms as students and pre-service teachers before, during, and after the pandemic: Victoria Leggett completed her first year teaching in the 2021–2022 school year; a Master's in Teaching student, her time as an educator is exclusively post-pandemic. Both Taylor Stanley and Daniel Shirey completed clinical observation hours during and after pandemic quarantine restrictions. Ms. Stanley completed student teaching in Spring 2022 and will begin her first year in the classroom in Fall 2022. Finally, Mr. Shirey completed all observation hours and will complete student teaching in Fall 2022.

When compared to our pre-quarantine clinical observations, post-quarantine era students appear to be less comfortable communicating, both socially and academically. As students and teachers reenter traditional classroom settings, teachers at all stages of their career should work together to bridge the communication gap that developed during the pandemic. This can be done by shifting to a literacy-based curriculum that utilizes active learning and multimodal tools. Encouraging educators to take up more responsibilities might seem unrealistic given public education's current conditions, but the current lapses inhibit current and future learning. Communication skills for civic engagement, multimodal learning, and active learning can help adapt education to better serve students in a post-pandemic learning environment.

Engaging Communication Skills for Civic Engagement

When completing our clinical requirements this semester, it became evident that students' communication skills decreased compared to pre-COVID performance observations. Students experienced difficulties participating in class discussions because of challenges in verbal communication. For example, Taylor noticed less diverse vocabulary usage among students and subsequent frustration at the inability to express their thoughts and feelings with educators and peers. Similarly, a cooperating teacher expressed concern, not only over students' communication difficulties academically but also socially, citing more interpersonal issues caused by lack of or miscommunication. This cooperating teacher described how when students would fight before the pandemic, they would have a period of ignoring each other and then eventually discuss the issue and resolve the conflict. However, this year students' conflicts are not resolved and they refuse to talk or communicate. She described students being obstinate in wanting to discuss the issue, indicating a lack of understanding in how talking with their peer could solve the issue. Finally, veteran educators in our teacher social circles throughout Kentucky also noticed that

students could not verbally communicate their wants, needs, struggles, or state their emotions accurately. These difficulties replicate themselves in written communication, not in syntax and grammar, but in the ability to translate their thoughts into writing effectively.

The skill to accurately and precisely use language is vital for students' academic and socio-emotional development, meaning these challenges among students are a significant area of concern. Although this issue was not unforeseen, as many of our clinical educators and colleagues expressed, teachers anticipated these issues because of the nature of learning virtually. Many students felt nervous and apprehensive about virtual learning, and their classroom participation decreased. Compared to in-person learning, students talked dramatically less, and despite educators' best efforts, encouraging student participation in a sea of black boxes on a screen proved difficult.

In "Voice Lessons: Rethinking the Relationship Between Education and Political Participation," Meghan Condon seeks to understand why this correlation exists and uses research that began with 8th-grade students in 1988 and followed them throughout their high school careers and eight years after their graduation. Condon uses students' standardized test scores and English grades to measure their verbal communication skills, such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, and argumentation, and her research reveals that the attainment of education, or the number of years one attends a school, matters less than the degree to which students acquire communication skills (Condon 826-27, 837-39). Essentially, the higher degree students achieved the ability to read critically, write clearly, speak both academically and socially, and communicate their ideas, the more they politically participated in elections, volunteer work, and political campaigns. Therefore, when the public education curriculum focuses on interdisciplinary literacy skills, including verbal communication, political participation—essential for modern

democracy—increases (Condon 838). ELA educators are at the forefront of ensuring the development of student communication skills, which have a crucial civic component.

ELA educators have the advantage of creating a more equitable society by becoming literacy leaders in their schools. Additionally, literacy-based curriculums across the disciplines tackles students' communication deficit head-on. As a pre-service teacher seeking dual certification in both ELA and Social Studies, Taylor has noticed that some Social Studies peers are at a loss as to how to incorporate literacy practices into their future classrooms, nor do they see its value. When working in a group project aimed at learning instructional strategies for literacy skills specific to history, one of her peers stated that she was frustrated she had to incorporate these practices in her unit plan. She remarked that she did not know how to help kids learn reading and writing skills nor was that her main concern as a pre-service Social Studies teacher. Pre-service Social Studies educators are proud to be at the center of increasing civic understanding and political engagement amongst students. However, even though it is at the heart of this curriculum, some pre-service educators are less invested in teaching literacy skills. The ability to critically read primary and secondary sources, analyze evidence, and then communicate a conclusion is the inquiry progression espoused in the Kentucky Academic Social Studies Standards and they all require literacy skills. Literacy-based curriculum is intertwined with Social Studies and the civic ideals of the discipline cannot be successfully taught without teaching literacy along with the content.

One response is interdisciplinary collaboration. David Peter Noskin's "Democratizing American literature: Lessons Learned from *The 1619 Project*" shows the rewards when interdisciplinary teams come together to create an engaging literacy-based curriculum for students. Noskin collaborated with a History teacher to create an American Studies class that uses materials from *The 1619*

Project and American literature to encourage students to explore the interrelation between the two subjects (Noskin 50-51). Noskin created a class where students engage in thought-provoking questions and make civic, historical, and literary assertions using verbal and written communication skills.

When faced with what seems like a communication crisis, educators can draw upon Condon and Noskin for direction. Ensuring literacy-based instruction aided by multimodal tools will directly address the issue of communication deficits, which will have long lasting effects on students' ability to participate in a democracy. ELA educators can use Condon's research as a literacy rallying cry for teachers of other disciplines and then offer skill-based literacy activities that can aid in content knowledge and disciplinary thinking skills. And we can follow in Noskin's footsteps and become literacy leaders in our schools and collaborate with other disciplines to enhance students' communication skills and understanding of the content.

Integrating Multimodal Learning in a Twenty-First Century Classroom

During the pandemic, a new way of teaching came with a new way of learning for many students. A vast number of students, especially those in K-12 settings, were unfamiliar with virtual learning. Teachers had to learn how to provide instruction through a computer screen, but students had to learn to *learn* through a computer screen. Arguably, students and teachers gained valuable technological skills during the pandemic, but now is the time to implement those skills for long-term improvement. While students were absorbing information through a computer screen, teachers were trying to build relationships. A lack of face-to-face and even audible communication made it difficult for students and teachers to connect personally. The pandemic deprived students of many opportunities to interact with their peers in a social setting. Using multimodal strategies,

teachers can help students bridge the gap formed during the pandemic.

COVID-19 led to many school districts utilizing a distance learning system (like Google Meets or Zoom) or a hybrid learning system (like combining face-to-face student-teacher interactions with virtual student-led learning). For example, many students completed their entire course instruction through Zoom with five minute breaks between classes. Essentially, the schedule remained the same, but students would hop on and off Zoom meetings between classes, rather than socialize with their peers. Hybrid instruction combined these concepts, with some days in-person and others online. The pandemic called for an unprecedented implementation of technology into education because technology has the potential to ease the gap between traditional classroom learning and pandemic-based learning. The instability of students and educators in a traditional classroom setting during the pandemic forced the education system to be more adaptable, accomplished through multimodal learning, or a method in which educators present content through multiple modes.

Multimodal learning can provide students with opportunities to develop critical literacy skills like analysis. An example of multimodal learning would be the pairing of a podcast, a poem, and a graphic novel, which is beneficial to students because it allows students to evaluate the content in multiple ways and learn in ways that play to students' individual strengths. For instance, English Language Learners may absorb information better when their educator pairs text with actions like using Graphics Interchange Format (GIFs) or short moving pictures and short videos helps to demonstrate an idea or vocabulary word. Students who are strong readers will be able to use the audible and visual content to enhance their understanding of the text, while students who are not strong readers will be able to garner knowledge about the content to support them while they read the text (Dreher 51).

Multimodal learning can doubly serve to develop students' self-efficacy and communication skills. The more a student works with the content, the higher chance the student has of deep comprehension and retention of the content. For instance, Victoria uses multimodal learning with her students in her high school English classroom by beginning with a short lecture to introduce the Salem Witch Trials, followed by a combination of discovery methods, audible content (a podcast), written content, and a visual component (a political cartoon) to promote student-driven inquiry about the Salem Witch Trials. Each of these activities calls for more teacher preparation than traditional lecture-note structured classes. Yet, one benefit to this approach is that students monitor their own learning processes, even working with group members to clear the confusion with minimal teacher intervention. They quickly adapt to working with peers in the groups, helping analyze the content, and even having content-based discussions without prompting. This indirect learning of communication helps them complete the assignment, while also leading to stronger peer relationships in the classroom.

The activity in Victoria's class provides students with multiple modes of content, similar to Jill Perttula and Deborah Bertlesman's observe in "Welcome to My House': Using a New Literacies Stance to Promote Critical Literacies." Perttula and Bertlesman viewed a series of ninth-grade ELA classes conducted by one teacher, and in one lesson, students were shown a series of politically-based videos and were asked to deconstruct them. This activity helped develop students' abilities to analyze audio and visual content, as they discussed camera angles, pacing, lighting, and word choice to address ELA standards that focus on point of view, perspective, and purpose.

Ms. B's strategy of teaching standards through a non-traditional method (in this case, using videos) provides students with disciplinary content while also teaching students how to absorb and analyze information from different

types of texts effectively. By using videos and other forms of media to meet the standards “through consistent integration of multimodal literacies,” Ms. B found that her students “have more and different opportunities to make meaning than in classrooms that do not have a new literacy stance” (Perttula and Bertlesman 55). Like Ms. B’s classroom, Victoria’s students were likely unfamiliar with analyzing political cartoons as part of a Salem Witch Trials unit. However, they worked together to complete the task with little assistance. Teaching students to read and analyze multimodal texts helps them to develop critical communication skills.

Replacing Rote Learning with Active Learning

In observations before, during, and after the pandemic, we often noticed students’ increased difficulties with retaining information, likely exacerbated by the effects of quarantine and social isolation—an observation also noted by a study about the effects of lost learning during COVID-19. In the study, more than 50% of teachers reported a significant loss of learning during the pandemic (Mann 4), even though, throughout the pandemic, educational systems continually sought to adapt in ways that lessened this gap. One way to build upon this ability to adapt is to shift away from rote learning (Ramya; Yibby 1), replacing it with teaching approaches that focus on how students process information to build upon the cognitive processes needed for successful problem-solving. Specifically, educators can integrate active learning by positioning students as constantly involved with instructional material (Bonwell and Eison iii). Unlike rote learning, active learning utilizes working memory, which has a longer duration and capacity and leads to a greater amount of information retained over an extended period of time (Yibby 1).

The Socratic Seminar is a common example of active learning, involving students circling their desks to engage in debate with one another, concentrating on asking questions to deepen their own understanding of the text. While Socratic

Seminars are often limited to specific textual discussion, there are a multitude of additional options for ELA teachers to utilize in their classrooms. One such option is the reading strategy of dramatic role playing, where students skim a passage and plan a short play where they act as the characters from the reading. Dramatic role playing also aids in the growth of skills pertaining to research, analyzing, public speaking, and planning. Through active learning as a group, students have increased opportunities to hone essential social skills—such as conflict resolution, active listening, and effective communication—although, active learning also occurs individually in tasks like formulating questions based on class-assigned texts, reflecting on discussions in journals, or critically analyzing thematic or stylistic relationships between texts in a comparative reading.

During his practice teaching in Fall 2021, Daniel observed the benefits of active learning—increased participation and knowledge retention, alongside improved social skills development—in a Creative Writing II class. For example, in a lesson on character development, he provided an adjective word bank with corresponding definitions on the screen. Then, students chose at least two adjectives that directly related to the protagonist of a short story in progress. After adding adjective selections to a character profile sheet, he assigned them to random pairs, having students role-play a two-minute conversation, each acting as their respective protagonist. When the two minutes passed, pairs split up and switched partners, having two more conversations with other students acting as their characters. Students reflected that this activity deepened their understanding of character development and adjectives, while also fostering imagination and communication skills through public speaking and acting.

The mass quarantines implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic forced educators to change the ways they taught, wholly adapting their teaching methods from in-person processes to procedures filtered through the

barrier of telecommunication. During virtual learning, students continued to learn; however, the technological barrier contributed to decreased practice with in-person communication skills. The pandemic demonstrated the vital importance of human connection. As we continue to return to “normal” in our classrooms, we can help students address gaps in communications skills through a literacy-based curriculum that incorporates civic engagement, multimodal tools, and active learning techniques. These implementations will aid the repair of communication skills damaged by social isolation, and with improved communication skills, students can more effectively convey their needs, wants, and views both in their classrooms and communities.

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