

Voicing a New/nuanced Classroom

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Teaching within a “post-pandemic” classroom requires me to reexamine my role as an educator. My teaching philosophy, personal definition of student engagement, and pedagogical purposes have shifted as I experience the classroom as both new and nuanced and cultivate a risky environment that relies on classroom impurities. In this essay, I provide an example of how I engage with the classroom as a risky and nuanced space by which the students become the instructor and disassemble the “purity” of the classroom.

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Acknowledging New/nuance in the Communication Classroom

Today’s lesson in COMM2381-Oral Communication is Voice. Borrowing from hooks (1994), I write in my teaching philosophy that education takes shape in a space of struggle. The activities today display this phenomenon thoroughly, as both the students and I struggle together to conceptualize “voice,” its attributes, and why it feels so nebulous.

At each yearly graduate teaching assistant training for my university’s general communication course, graduate instructors tend to grow bored when the topic of “social mediated communication” comes into play. This is due to a mixture of a lack of engagement with this topic, assigned readings that fail to shake up students’ perceptions, and overall graduate instructors’ personal frustration with such dry material. At the last meeting, a colleague commented that students are “tired” of talking about social media after having to do everything through social media since the spring of 2020. In this essay, I provide a glimpse into how I respond to facilitating social mediated communication in a “post-pandemic” classroom. I use a lesson focusing on voice to encourage students to take the lead in the classroom. In doing so, I recognize this lesson as reorienting my idea of voice and the ways by which COVID-19 has impacted features of the class and my own pedagogy.

After several semesters of hearing these complaints, I began wondering how to facilitate a more engaged “social media” week, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic shifted undergraduate students to use social media for both academic and non-academic social purposes (Greenhow & Chapman, 2020; Makki & Bali, 2021) and has ultimately disrupted teaching patterns (Berry, 2020; Schwartzman, 2020). Additionally, in effort to engage with this material at deeper levels with my students, I reassessed how I could explore this discussion within the setting of the “new normal” of a “post-pandemic” classroom. The week prior to our discussion of social mediated communication, I asked the students to list their personal reasons for using various social media platforms. We wrote those reasons on the board and thematically analyzed them in an effort to locate broad communicative needs that students have and use social media to meet. One of the communicative needs was a blending of “needing to be heard” and “exercising voice.” From this exercise I revisited my original social mediated communication lesson plan and renamed the lesson to display the particular communicative tension the students seem to struggle with and long to discuss: Voice.

As the students and I began our lesson on “voice,” I reminded them to think of their answers within the context of their pandemic and “post-pandemic” experiences. I started the lesson by posing four questions on the board: “What is voice,” “What can you voice,” “What do you struggle to voice,” and “What are the parts that make up ‘Voice’?” Students were then encouraged to journal their answers to the questions. Once students spent time processing and writing their own answers to these questions, they worked in groups to share and combine their reflective answers to form a collective group argument. While this form of think, pair, share (Lightner & Tomaswick, 2017; Lyman, 1981) and collective work is

not new to the students in my class, I reminded them to think about their answers in context with how the COVID-19 pandemic situates us within a “new normal.”

The New/uauced Classroom as Risky

The white board stretches from one side of the room to the next and judging by the smudges left from other classes hosted in this space, the entirety of the white space has not been used. I give each group a dry erase marker and ask them to step up to the board and fill it out with their group’s answers to my questions. I step aside and give them free reign. The board becomes their terrain, and I am their audience. They work together to curate how their groups’, or classroom “neighborhoods” (McKinney et al., 2006), answers reflect their conversation.

I watch their words—punctuated through the students’ various handwriting styles, misspelled words, oddly spaced sentences, hand-erased attempts to fix mistakes—map a class conversation. The edges of the board frame words structured with critical and interrogative potential (Block, 2020). Some students write and talk, engage and listen, laugh and stay seated, interrupt and apologize with a mask on. Some do this all without a mask worn. I find myself not worried as much as I used to when it came to the potentiality of masks being left at home. Instead, I watch the students interact and use the space of the board to visualize their answers. I wonder, could this “new normal” be a returning-to, and a re-voicing?

Upon reflection of this post-pandemic voice activity as substitute for social mediated communication, I realize I am taking a risk. I am acknowledging that my time of “teaching” and using the board is done for the day, and like Dutch educator, Gert Biesta (2022) writes, I “allow reality to take [my] place” (p. ix). When training to teach a similar course at my alma mater, I was nervous to let go of the shaky authority my role gave me. While the pandemic ushered new pedagogical panics as I reexamined my role as an educator in a hybrid synchronous-asynchronous classroom, it also forced me to take a step back. I reengaged with my teaching philosophy, rewired the way in which I define student engagement, and further solidified my pedagogical longing to care for students by cultivating a risky environment.

This post-pandemic classroom allows me to develop such a risk. Without stating so, I ask my students to take the lead, to become the instructor, and wreak havoc on the largely clean dry erase board. I tell them, “make it messy and work together in your ‘neighborhoods’ to teach us about voice.” Therefore, the writing on the board is done by the students’ hands, not mine. The words are born from their discussions.

The New/uauced Classroom as Impure

Once the board is full of their answers, we partake in an activity in which we locate “saturated” words (words of complexity, nuance, and interpretive value). The term “saturated” is a helpful term I employ in many class discussions and activities as it helps the students visualize the nuance of language. I first ask my students to tell me which words or phrases on the board seem saturated. As these terms are listed out loud by the class, I take my own marker and add new markings, swirls, additional text, and symbols. With the class’s comments made as a group, I underline words and add contextual meanings. To add context, we simply discuss these saturated terms. As I further pronounce their words with my own marker, I ask the class to provide additional phrases and/or meanings that flesh out the saturated terms. According to the class, “under-pendings” comes to mean “layered,” “rhythm” expands to “style,” and “word choice” implies “positionality” and “access.”

From their ponderings of voice in a “post-pandemic” world, the concept of voice becomes a living, breathing term—recognizable to each pupil—with its multiple meanings. Voice is power, to give expression, to be projected. We find it easier to share our voice when we are part of what holds power, and more challenging to do so in isolation. We use our Voice to dream of an inclusive, open, and radical Public. Our voice both recognizes this and is an instrument to qualify this. By focusing on the concept of voice, the arguments, examples, and questions the students work together to compile allow us to think about voice and platform. Since the students use terms such as “public,” “power,” and raise issues of

inclusivity/exclusivity, I introduce them to Warner's (2005) theory of publics and counterpublics and Hill's (2018) case study exemplifying Black Twitter as a digital counterpublic. I draw a diagram to help us visualize the idea of publics and counterpublics amongst the students' words on the whiteboard. I invite questions and in turn, I ask them to think of ways by which they use their voice on social media as both a public and a counterpublic. I then ask the class to ponder aloud how this may have shifted—and continues to shift—in the face of a global pandemic.

The class is dismissed, the room empties, and I take off my mask. I walk to the back wall of the classroom and visually take in the chaos of the board. The dry erase board's clean, white space is gone and replaced by a tapestry of sentences, words, smudge marks, and even a smiley face one student left as a surprise. I take a moment to celebrate how the purity of the board transformed into an impurity (Shotwell, 2016) that tells a grander story of students interrogating the concept of voice. They marry the old idea of voice, to the often isolated and mediated voice of the pandemic, to this "new" and "post-pandemic" voice. We come to understand from the textual and visual display of the board that Voice remains tricky, and it remains needed—post-pandemic or not.

The "post-pandemic" and "new normal" world of teaching requires us to confront classroom tools (such as technology and group discussions) we assumed held novelty (Edwards, 2021). Following both Edwards' and Schwartzman's (2020) call to recognize ways by which a post-pandemic classroom provides opportunities to build community, I register with the reality of our world, I ask my students to rely on their classroom "neighborhoods," give them space on the board to messily formulate their arguments, and let the impurities of this process be what teaches us. The dichotomy of "good" and "bad" social media usage no longer influences our discussion of technologically housed communication and the physical setting of classroom "neighborhoods" provides students with a visual example of classroom community-building.

While this is a single activity in response to one issue with the oral communication course, I see its fingerprints in other lessons I facilitate in this class and other classes I have taught. Additionally, this "post-pandemic" lesson—whilst experiential and often part of the communication classroom planning process—requires us to problematize the purity of social media communication. Instead of facilitating discussion on the boundaries built into mediated communication, as the professor (and a graduate student charting my own pedagogical practices), I embrace the impurities of voice heavily built into the undergraduate students' concept and practice of social media. By doing so, the students are re-centered in the story of the classroom. We first ask them what it is they communicatively need. Second, we encourage them to frame these needs through the process of think, pair, share. Third, in the act of sharing, we prompt them to make the whiteboard messy. They see the visual role they play in messing up the order of normative education, and more importantly, through their "neighborhood's" wording. Fourth, we help them understand how their words and experiences form theories. Therefore, we see the students not as objects within the classroom, but as theorists themselves (Lechuga, 2020), embodying the theories by which we critically engage. Being guided by these steps as I prepare lessons for a post-pandemic classroom allows me to capture a more culturally centered pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2021), think more critically about what type of education is needed in the "post-pandemic" classroom (Hill et al., 2020; Schwartzman, 2020), and continue pressing into issues of socio-emotional needs with the students (Mello & Grobmeier, 2021).

The New/ nuanced Classroom Offering Voice

Like the students argued in relation to social mediated platforms, voice in a "post-pandemic" classroom is risky, encouraging, mystifies purity, and ever full of nuance. From a lens which sees voice being operative in a world that cannot decide if we are in a headspace to reflect on the pandemic just yet, the students helped me understand that voice is in the act of being heard, as much as it is in the act of hearing. Voice is mediated through virtual platforms, physical platforms, relational platforms, platforms of hope—all of which have been refined through definition and longing during the COVID-19 pandemic and its continuing ripple effects in our new/ nuanced classroom.

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