

Poetic Strategies For Combating Learning Loss Due To The COVID 19 Pandemic: A Culturally Responsive Approach

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Abstract—The adoption of remote learning during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic magnified the inequities in educational systems and contributed to the decline in academic achievement. Oftentimes, remote learning policies exacerbated problem. In some instances, students were not required to be live on camera. Consequently, students were less engaged and on-line attendance problems ensued. The return to in-person instruction was seen as a panacea to the decline in student learning. Unfortunately, the return to in-person instruction revealed many students lacked motivation and had not retained knowledge acquired prior to virtual learning. This paper describes how a 9th grade Reading Specialist used poetry in efforts to recover learning loss caused by virtual learning during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords—COVID-19, Virtual Learning, Reading, Poetry, Culturally Responsive, Teaching

Remote Learning. Those words were met with much in trepidation as a Reading Specialist. When my school district made the decision to pause in-person instruction for remote learning to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus, I was uncertain about how to support my 9th grade reluctant readers with many testing at a 3rd grade reading level. As one of the schools' reading specialist, I was responsible for five sections of Reading Foundations. The Reading Foundation course targeted 9th grade students identified as reluctant readers based on test scores, behaviors, and academic achievements. My school district adopted the Gradual Release of Responsibility model to help improve reading achievements among reluctant readers. This model incorporates guided instruction, collaboration among teacher and students, and independent work. I also incorporated research based reading strategies and techniques to foster quality reading instruction which promotes critical thinking and comprehension skills coupled with multicultural, low-level high-interest reading options. Essential to student learning was the establishment of a caring and engaging classroom whereby each student felt a sense of belonging. How was I going to maintain a high level of instruction and provide a supportive socio-emotional safe environment via

Zoom were my greatest concerns during remote learning.

From the outset, my greatest concerns came to fruition. Some of my students had no or limited access to the internet for virtual learning. A remote learning policy exacerbated problem. It mandated that students were not required to be live on camera. Consequently, this policy contributed to less engaged students and heighten an existing pre-pandemic attendance problem. Often, the lack of engagement was due to distractions within the home. It was very common to view students dozing off in bed during classroom instruction, participating with other forms of technology (i.e. television, video games, cellphones, etc.) and hearing conversations of family members in the background while class was in session. Attendance was very inconsistent, as most students were not monitored. Older siblings became a convenient childcare service for working parents left with no other alternative. At least 30 percent of my students were no shows. Attendance issues were reported to parents/guardians and administrators but was often met with no consequences. All of these factors and more made it difficult to engage students who often chose to be off camera.

It is a not a far stretch to say that my students and myself longed for our brick and mortar classroom that offered the security of a safe, caring, and engaging environment. I spent many days and nights contemplating and researching ways to capture the vibrancy of in-person classroom in a virtual environment. Some of the strategies I used to engage students consisted of greeting each student by name as they entered the virtual learning environment, playing upbeat music while students were joining the session in order to wake up their senses, and offering extra credit for students who turned on their cameras. Each strategy was met with limited success with extra credit being the most popular among students.

Student's mental health was also a major concern of mine. During the height of the pandemic, many students had experienced the loss of family members and neighbors to the coronavirus and nearly all were emotionally distraught from the lack of social interactions that the school site offered. Given the stressors presented by the pandemic, I used emoji's

in our chats and encouraged students to check in with an emoji that described their mood. Emojis offered insights on how to interact and emotionally support students. My observations of student's emotional dispositions lead to the decision to restructure the purpose of Zoom breakout rooms. The revamped breakout rooms served multiple purposes all of which promoted student engagement. I used them for collaborative work that fostered reading skill development; individual teacher support, which addressed academic and personal challenges; and open discussion time, whereby students were allowed to freely express non-academic concerns. The new and revamped Zoom breakout rooms were met with mixed results. They were successful for students that held a special interest in doing well academically, however, for most, the strategies did not improve student engagement nor academic performance.

The return to in-person instruction was welcomed like a tall glass of ice water after a long mountain hike on an intensely heated sun drenched day. On the first day of returning to in-person instruction, my enthusiasm encountered less than enthusiastic students. They were exhibiting all-time low energy levels. Days after the initial return to in-person instruction, students still had no sense of urgency to perform well, and lacked motivation to complete assignments with pride and tact. Further, they were unable to remain focused for long periods of time that is required for developing the skills for becoming a fluent reader. My students had grown accustomed to playing video games on their cell phones and personal computers. Simply stated, they had no interest in learning. Research supports my personal observation that the coronavirus reversed months of academic achievement. To combat the loss of learning during the pandemic my district adopted a technology program that provided district issued Chromebooks to every student, established credit recovery programs, added more reading classes, and implemented flexible grading to allow students extended time to submit assignments. The scope and impact of district-wide strategies to counter learning loss resulting from the pandemic will take time to reveal through research. However, my sense of urgency to improve student reading levels required me to take immediate action. Perhaps benefits of remote learning were my improved technology skills and gaining more knowledge about students during individual Zoom breakout room sessions. These individual discussions unveiled students' creativity in the form of drama, music and art. This student knowledge sprouted the idea of incorporating more and various forms of poetry into the curriculum. As someone who reads and write poetry, I know this art form broadens reading choices and can be written about any subject. The idea was well-received and generated a new level of excitement in the classroom environment. I incorporated poetry into our established time for journaling. Poetry afforded my students the opportunity to explore personal and community issues. Reading and writing was now

relevant to their daily lives as they were able to journal in any form of free write they chose. Some students wrote about memories while others created lyrics to a song. Books of poetry or short novels written in prose were made readily available in the classroom. They became very popular as poetry contains fewer words; however still very useful for extending existing vocabulary and increasing reading, writing, and thinking skills. My students exhibited a strong willingness to engage others with their creativity. Literature circles became vibrant places for learning that promoted rich discussions, analytical thinking, authentic engagement, a sense of belonging - all of which led to more reading and a healthier stamina to get through texts that were more complicated. Succinctly put, poetry helped my students restore their confidence in reading and highlighted the importance of making instruction culturally relevant to promote academic success.

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