



Participatory Writing in the Remote ESOL Classroom Space: Critical Learnings from a Pandemic

This paper explores the ways ESOL writing instructors implement and assess participatory writing practices in the classroom using digital technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participatory writing practices are largely sociocultural in nature and thereby resist the notion of standardized and individualized practices to focus on co-creating a shared culture around writing (Jenkins et al., 2016). In other words, they require that students voluntarily enculturate themselves into broader, co-created discourse communities (Johns, 1997). Participatory writing practices and any subsequent assessment of them are complicated by inequitable access to and varying levels of comfort with educational and other digital technologies—a fact which is particularly salient considering that a substantial majority of ESOL courses in California shifted to remote instruction in early 2020.

Using several remotely taught post-secondary ESOL writing courses in California as critical entry points for this work, we examine our collective understanding of participation in light of the shift to remote teaching and learning while also pushing back against traditional western notions of participatory writing implementation and assessment to offer a more expansive and inclusive model in which remote students are encouraged to go beyond “pseudotransactional” forms of collaboration (Wardle & Downs, 2020). With these remote ESOL writing courses as examples, we argue that there are innate challenges to supporting students in gaining a new language through participatory writing practices while simultaneously grappling with new technologies and remote learning, but we also suggest that it can be accomplished given appropriate training, tools, and attention to power dynamics.

Keywords: participatory writing, participatory culture, digital technologies, remote teaching, sociocultural learning theory

Writing that is intended to be used to accomplish things is extremely social and relational—it is created amidst and shaped by complex webs of people and other texts. (Wardle & Downs, 2020, p. 505)

This paper explores the ways two writing instructors implemented and assessed participatory writing practices in their English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classrooms, particularly in light of the increased use of digital technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participatory writing practices are largely sociocultural in nature and thereby resist the notion of standardized and individualized practices to focus on co-creating a shared culture and space around writing (Jenkins et al., 2016). In other words, they require that students voluntarily enculturate themselves into a broader, co-created academic

discourse community (Johns, 1997). Participatory writing practices and any subsequent assessment of them are complicated by inequitable access to and varying levels of comfort with educational and other digital technologies—a fact which is particularly salient considering that a substantial majority of ESOL courses in California, including ours, shifted to remote instruction in early 2020.

Like most of our educator-colleagues, the pandemic of 2020 disrupted patterns and mindsets we did not entirely realize we had developed. It also thrust us into action, forcing us to adopt new pedagogies and implement new classroom tools. We had already been engaging with participatory writing practices in our face-to-face classrooms. The question, of course, was whether or not we could translate those practices to a remote learning environment, and, if so, what would be lost and/or gained in the process. Just as important, could those practices be translated in a way that provided not just equal *access* to digital and other literacies for students of diverse backgrounds, but could participatory writing practices, given the right implementation and an eye toward equity, actually enhance those literacies?

Using several of our own post-secondary ESOL courses as critical entry points for this work, we examine our collective understanding of participation during the shift to remote teaching and learning. We push back against traditional western notions of participatory writing implementation and assessment to offer a more expansive and inclusive model in which remote students are encouraged to go beyond “pseudotransactional” forms of collaboration that emulate collaborative practices but are in fact teacher prescribed and at times inauthentic (Wardle & Downs, 2020). With these remote ESOL courses as examples, we argue that there are indeed innate challenges to supporting students in gaining and negotiating a new language through participatory writing practices while simultaneously grappling with new technologies and remote learning, but our experience also suggests that it can be accomplished given appropriate training, tools, and attention to sensitively navigating power dynamics.

In what follows, we share what we have taken from theory regarding participatory culture, its connection to Vygotsky’s (1979) Sociocultural Learning Theory, and, finally, how those theories, taken together, shape our pedagogical beliefs and practices around teaching writing in a participatory ESOL classroom space. We also share specific insights from our classrooms, including: (a) which participatory writing practices supported students in generating their own knowledge and discourses, (b) what challenges we faced in applying these practices in a remote space in which inequities were abundant, and (c) which aspects of this overall experience continue to keep us thinking, learning, and innovating.

Participatory Culture and Sociocultural Learning Theory

In educational circles, participatory culture is somewhat broadly defined. For the purposes of this paper, we rely on three aspects of participatory practices within a distance learning ESOL reading and writing context. These include: (a) participatory spaces as places of educational disruption, (b) participatory spaces as places of knowledge and discourse generation, and (c) participatory spaces as places of inclusion of authentic audience. We argue that participatory culture within a technological space is best defined by Jenkins et al. (2016) as a space that values diversity and democracy through interactions and assumes that students are capable of making decisions and expressing themselves in various ways and across multiple genres. Jenkins et al. (2016) extend this definition by highlighting that participatory culture is also one “in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another” (p. 4). Very much in line with our experiences as educators, Arroyo (2013) shares that participatory learning theories value the act of teaching *and* the act of collaboration.

Valuing collective acts of learning, the participatory ESOL classroom becomes a space of educational disruption and challenges more traditional educational hierarchies. This is not to suggest that

instructors entirely hand over their syllabi to the class, nor ignore their position as a designated leader of the classroom, but rather that the instructor leverages students' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) to generate and offer students opportunities to make authentic connections on their own, especially within their writing production practice. This leveraging of students' funds of knowledge, or background experiences, allows for student-led learning, including more opportunities for civic engagement. After all, those who are unable to engage with their communities and governments are more likely to be marginalized, making literacy development an issue of power (Freire, 1970; Reynolds & Bruch, 2002).

It comes perhaps as no surprise that the root of participatory culture and writing is Vygotsky's (1979) sociocultural learning theory. This theory suggests that learning happens in a social situation and subsequently becomes internalized learning. This further suggests that as students interact with others, all aspects required of the interaction—including the tools used to foster that interaction—become negotiated practices between participants; later, those internalized negotiations become their strategies for understanding and communicating with the world outside of the classroom space. In a sociocultural activity, for example, multiple writers collaborate to create a single final text or product. Within this space of sociocultural learning, students begin to take the basic conventions of writing and speaking and to revise those tenets to fit the needs of their interactions, thereby creating their own unique discourse communities (Johns, 1997).

Vygotsky (1997) noted that the *semiotics of the interaction* play a role within the co-construction of knowledge between participants. These semiotics include both the language used and created and any technologies employed in that process. In turn, these are also included within the later internalization of the learned experience to further support independent problem-solving and engagement with others. Sociocultural learning theory, when used as a lens for teaching, implies that students will interact, collaborate, and negotiate *in order to learn*.

Through the interactions of students with a variety of backgrounds and funds of knowledge, a third discourse space is created in which students not only learn through the negotiation of meaning but also develop a deeper sense of community with their peers. Most "traditional" classrooms are considered places of knowledge dissemination (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). While there are good and important reasons for teachers to provide explicit language instruction, knowledge itself is not necessarily generated in this way. By contrast, participatory classrooms allow for knowledge generation. Moje et al. (2004) claim that this third discourse space is merged from the primary discourses of home and the secondary discourses of school and other formal institutional learning spaces. We would argue that a third space does not need to be framed as having been born entirely as a result of other existing spaces even if that new space is inevitably influenced by them. What we know for certain is that when teaching and learning no longer occur in traditional face-to-face contexts, discourses that have previously been unobserved may become apparent (Arroyo, 2013).

Participatory Writing as Praxis

When situating participatory writing practices within an ESOL setting, we align our beliefs with that of Bryers (2015) in that emerging multilinguals are *users of language* rather than mere learners of language. This, we assert, has a humanizing effect as it suggests students have active rather than passive roles. Additionally, within this framing, students rely on languages including and beyond English, a framing that demonstrates the inherent value of all of their languages and associated cultures. Treating students like *users* rather than *learners* of language positions the participatory writing instructor as an active listener, an activity supporter, a guide for conversations, and a facilitator for acts of learning (Bryers, 2015). In this sense, the instructor becomes an active participant within: (a) the negotiation of language use, (b) the

active co-construction of the newly forming discourse community, and (c) the reciprocal space in which the instructor is learning new language and worldviews alongside their students.

Participatory writing practices require a negotiation regarding end-products and the process by which students, working in collaboration, will achieve an end-product (Johnson, 1997). In other words, even when students work individually on sections for a larger multi-authored end-product, writing is never done in isolation (Johnson, 1997). Johnson (1997) shares two types of collaborative writing practices. The first is the traditional (and arguably unpopular) peer-review process in which students gather together to work on an individual's text and the individual ultimately decides which suggestions to accept and which to ignore. In the end, negotiation occurs during the group discussion about the work and the end-product falls upon the individual. This form of collaborative writing is often viewed as pseudotransactional in that the communication process merely simulates reality with no real audience in mind (Wardle & Downs, 2020). In other words, the act of collaborating is only for the purposes of schooling and not for authentic participatory learning.

A second form of collaborative writing is called *plural authors, singular texts* (Johnson, 1997). In the classroom, this type of collaboration most commonly manifests in the completion of a group essay or other written project. The increasingly popular use of Project-Based Learning (PBL) is another example of *plural authors, single text*. Gold-Standard PBL design elements include: (a) challenging problems or questions, (b) sustained inquiry, (c) authenticity, (d) student voice and choice, (e) reflection, (f) critique and revision, and (g) public product (Buck Institute for Education, 2017). Within an ESOL classroom space, PBL might include designing creative works for campus beautification, launching websites or producing podcasts designed to engage others in activism, or publishing a collection of essays salient to the surrounding community and its concerns.

In the aforementioned form, students not only negotiate the process of writing but they also negotiate the end-product. Through this form of collaboration, Johnson (1997) claims that students create new points of view and collectively build new discourses. This practice negates the pseudotransactional forms of writing in that participants respond to each other, respond to the text, and negotiate meaning-making in both the act of writing and their shared discussion of the writing process. Coming back to Vygotsky's (1979, 1997) work is useful here as his lens suggests that instructors structure activities which require engagement with language, discourse, and actions important to the broader learning community.

The Courses

In what follows, we describe several courses taught during the pandemic of 2020 which compelled most institutions of higher education to shift toward online/remote coursework. Two of these occurred in a Southern California community college ESOL department and two in a Southern California Intensive English Program (IEP). Though the student demographics were somewhat unique—i.e., the community college students were largely from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds whereas the IEP students were largely from more advantaged family backgrounds in their home countries—the approximate course levels, the teachers, the pedagogical strategies, and the assigned materials were nearly identical. So, too, was the broader community in which these students lived (the same county in Southern California) and the platforms they were using; both institutions, for example, utilized the Canvas Learning Management Platform (LMP) for asynchronous work and Zoom for synchronous meetings. Prior to the pandemic, these courses were taught entirely in person. Post-pandemic, each course had twice weekly synchronous meetings on Zoom in addition to weekly asynchronous work on Canvas and assigned group work.

There were two notable differences between the two groups that deserve mentioning here. First, two of the courses were taught immediately following the start of the pandemic (in the summer of 2020) and two were taught the following semester. This gave the teachers some additional time to re-envision and modify the courses to meet students' needs and the ongoing realities of the pandemic. Another notable difference between the courses was their Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs). The community college courses included SLOs for reading, writing, and grammar, whereas the IEP courses were centered on reading and writing. Additionally, the community college courses were 5-unit courses and the IEP courses were non-credit (though the approximate number of classroom hours was the same). Even though the grammar component of the community college courses was largely taught inductively and consisted of a relatively small overall amount of instruction time (approximately 10%), this difference is an important one when considering any potential variations in content and possible student experience.

In most other ways, the courses were largely identical, at least from a design standpoint, though, as any educator knows, no two class sessions—and certainly no two individual courses—will ever be truly identical; such is the reality of the unique dynamics of any group. Nonetheless, to most observers, the courses would have looked similar day to day. In what follows, we will outline the content and curriculum of the courses as well as offer glimpses into some of the participatory writing practices and assignments which supported students in generating their own knowledge and discourse communities.

Content and Curriculum

We contend that participatory writing offers students opportunities to engage not just with their own thoughts but with the world around them—and to do that in authentic, meaningful, and practical ways. In the courses described in this paper, students wrote about their views/experiences, their peers' views/experiences, and those of the authors and characters they encountered in course readings. Students did this largely through the use of shared Google Docs, Google Slides, and Google Sites, but also through the co-creation of other materials that included visual, audio, digital, and written components (i.e., digital literacies).

Course materials included a selection of TED Talks, short documentaries, news articles, personal essays, position papers (carefully selected and scaffolded to their level), one graphic novel, and two short Young Adult novels. Students were given time to read in class. Most of the materials were chosen explicitly for their equity- and/or justice-related themes and in response to the challenges of the particular zeitgeist in which the courses occurred (i.e., during a global pandemic and the resurgence and recognition of the Black Lives Matter movement). Further, several modules in the courses were at least loosely designed using some of the fundamentals of PBL, including the use of an overarching set of guiding questions. They were: *What do we see as some of the most serious problems in our society? How can we best solve/overcome one of those problems in our community?*

PBL, in conjunction with the integration of developmental reading and writing, were central to these courses because, as Johnson (1997) has noted, the very nature of participatory writing practices demands that negotiation and collaboration lead to an end-product. According to Ball (2016), PBL situates student capacity and voice, especially when paired with the types of student-centered strategies found in learning communities. It is our belief that participatory writing activities foster these same strategies, functioning much like learning communities in the way they produce their own discourses. This is part of what shifts activities that might, in the absence of careful planning, look like mere group projects or traditional peer-review assignments to the level of authentic participatory writing practices.

Some of the major course activities (outside of reading and limited discussions of grammar) were holistically assessed; others were relatively low-stakes, formative, and even spontaneous; but, broadly, they all fell into the following categories:

1. Public writing;
2. Reflective writing;
3. Video creation, podcasting, blogging, webpage creation; or
4. Social writing, including forms of annotation, meme creation and sharing, comic creation.

There was much crossover between these categories, as readers will note when we provide specific classroom examples. Most projects included components from at least two to three categories during different moments of the writing process. Major end-products included: (a) a website, (b) a “mini” podcast, (c) a curated group writing (much like an anthology), and (d) a social media scrapbook or mini comic book (students’ choice).

Participatory Writing in Action: Select Classroom Examples

Students began most synchronous class sessions with a singular prompt in a shared Google Doc. The day’s prompt, typically, related in at least a peripheral way to that week’s reading. For instance, when reading *The Giver*, students responded to a prompt regarding their views on capital punishment and its status in their home countries and the United States. Individually (and with repeated verbal cues from their instructor), students replied to the prompt in writing. After completing their written responses, they began responding, in real time, to their peers’ writing. After several “rounds” of written discussion, students were placed in breakout groups and tasked with writing a “mini” position piece on capital punishment. Notably, students had previously examined position pieces, so the concept was not altogether new. Together, they used a new section of the shared Google Doc to craft a singular, multi-authored piece of writing. Later, they would use that draft as the springboard for a Google Site exploring one of the equity- and justice-related themes of the class (their end-product). Because this type of writing is socially situated and future-facing, and because students understand it to result in a public end-product, we refer to it here as public writing.

In addition to working together toward public end-products as offered in the example above, students regularly engaged in reflective participatory writing. For instance, another assignment required that students complete a short social location essay—i.e., an essay contemplating a person’s varying identities against the backdrop of their geographic location—based on readings of several mentor texts. After completing their first essay draft, students were provided with a mini-lesson on self-annotation and asked to self-annotate their writing. They were given specific types of annotation to include in the margin comments of their work, including: (a) questions for peer/self, (b) developmental notes for peer/self, and (c) shows of confidence. After completing their self-annotation task, they shared their annotated work with a peer who—in a twist on the dreaded peer-review assignment—was asked to reply back to the original student’s annotations and add only a very limited number of new comments. The original student then made changes, replied to their peer’s comments, and sent it back again. This lasted several rounds, resulting, in some cases, in an extraordinarily in-depth written dialogue in the margins of the document.

The results of this activity were notable on several levels. First, because this assignment was attached to a short essay on social location, it had inherently reflective elements from the start. Moreover, the self-annotation aspect furthered that reflection and added elements of metacognition. By engaging in authentic dialogue through the comment feature in Google Docs, students were offered a social outlet through which to further both their skill-development and sense of community. We have both written

and presented extensively on Freire's culture circles (see Metz-Matthews & McConnell, 2022; McConnell & Metz-Matthews, 2023), and it was not lost on us during this activity that the dialogic processes in which students were engaged took on some of the inherent characteristics of culture circles.

Many before us (e.g., Bourdieu, 1980/1990; Bracewell & Breuleux, 1994; Bracewell & Witte, 2008; Chenoweth & Hayes, 2003) have suggested that writing is social in nature, but we assert that some of it is more literally so. Our social annotation activity above is one example of this; yet another strikes us as worthy of mentioning. Two of the courses we discuss in this paper had access to an institutional Pronto account. Pronto is, according to its own website, "a communication hub created for the everyday user . . . [that connect] people via chat and video, so they can learn faster, work smarter, and communicate seamlessly." As an app, it offers students and teachers an opportunity to mask their phone numbers and still communicate via instant message, video chat, and meme sharing.

In the context of this course, Pronto offered students opportunities to communicate with their professor and with one another in a low-stakes (ungraded), casual manner. In this way, it not only served as a means of exchanging information (e.g., asking clarifying questions about assignments), but also provided a social space in which to build and sustain discourse and community. The community-building was evident in a striking number of instances. Students shared photos from their daily walks and of their kids' birthday parties; they shared news of illnesses and sent get-well messages to one another; they shared self-generated memes and music videos themed for the days of the week (e.g., Manic Mondays and Fun Fridays); and, in one particularly moving instance, provided restaurant recommendations and recipes for food from their home countries because, during the pandemic, they had to forgo the traditional end-of-semester potluck.

It would be tempting, we think, to categorize this type of activity as "outside the classroom" and thus of less, if any, interest to us as educators, but we see these activities as extensions of and contributors to the participatory writing communities, or third spaces, that the students co-created over the course of the semester. As we will discuss in the critical reflection section that follows, we surmise that they played a key role in both propelling and sustaining the classroom community.

Reflecting on Our Experience

The pandemic threw us all for a loop; there is really no other, more "academic" or "eloquent" way of writing that. We stumbled. We grasped at straws. We dug deep into the funds of knowledge that we, as educators, were privileged to have at our disposal. We were not sure, at first, how to create community absent the possibility of sitting next to one another, chatting, laughing until our bellies ached. We also were not sure how power dynamics would play out in these new virtual spaces—especially considering the dynamics that were simultaneously playing out in the world around us. Everything felt heavy. The pandemic. A looming election. The seemingly unending racial and social injustices and inequities raging in full force across the nation. The fact that we, as educators and parents, and our students, themselves often parents, were trying to monitor our children's remote schooling in incredibly challenging scenarios. Like so very many of our colleagues around the world, we felt at times as if we were walking about in limbo, and the last thing we wanted to do was design new curriculum—and remote curriculum at that.

But we are educators and there is so very little time to wallow when we know students are on their way. So we got to work. The courses we have described in this article are the fruits of that labor—the wildly unutterable mistakes, the activities that did not quite land, the constant trial and error, and of course the surprising number of successes. We were not convinced that the types of participatory writing practices and PBL that we had come to value as educators would translate to the remote ESOL classroom

with the world on (figurative) fire outside the confines of our homes and Zoom rooms. Yet they did translate—perhaps not perfectly, but no good translation fails to take into account that language—like teaching—is dynamic on its most boring day.

We learned an inordinate amount through this process—about participatory writing, about our students, and about ourselves as researcher-educators. We think, upon reflection, that our major takeaways can be divided into three categories: (a) we live best socially and we write best socially, (b) assessment of remote participatory writing practices is complicated, but not impossible, and (c) the successes of participatory writing in the remote ESOL classroom outweigh the inherent challenges.

Social Lives, Social Writing

We live best socially and we write best socially. The implementation of participatory writing practices in our remote ESOL classrooms led to a social component of writing that was, admittedly, surprising for us even after nearly 30 years of collective teaching between us. We certainly already viewed writing as social, but we were struck by the degree to which the social component contoured our and our students' experiences, especially considering the remote nature of the courses and the potential for digital inequities between students.

Outside of being evident in the core elements of PBL attached to the Google Site creation project, one of the places the social element was most apparent was in the self-annotation activity attached to students' social location essays. While the original design of that assignment was focused on the developmental writing aspect of responding to peers' feedback and subsequently improving a first draft, we believe the use of what some have termed "social annotation" offers a more expansive and inclusive image of collaboration (Wardle & Downs, 2020). Rather than ask students to merely provide one-time feedback to their peers, social annotation engages them in interactive cycles of communication in a way that more closely resembles authentic conversation. Social annotation allows students to become genuine audiences to one another while engaging within a third space of written communication.

Nonetheless, post social-annotation activity, we were surprised to discover that, in the scholarly literature, social annotation has been largely defined as "the use of collaborative technologies to help students draw meaningful connections to texts *alongside their peers* [emphasis added]" (Brown & Croft, 2020, p. 1). What we experienced in class—and, frankly, what felt genuinely powerful in class—was slightly out of step with that definition. We had asked students not just to annotate their own work alongside their peers (i.e., self-annotation), but to then engage in meaningful social dialogue within the margins of their and others' writing. The disconnect between what we have since found in the literature and what we saw and felt in our classrooms suggests to us that social annotation should be reframed to include more than the mere act of annotating alongside one's peers (after all, that is not necessarily social). We contend, instead, that it should also include the acts of thinking and annotating both *with* and *for* those very peers, reinforcing our view that students are *users of language* rather than mere learners of language (Bryers, 2015), even in classroom environments where students seek out what they might term *language learning*.

The social element of writing was also apparent in our students' interactions on Pronto. Over time, we came to view the Pronto space as yet another example of the third space that Moje et al. (2004) speak of in their work. We realized that Pronto took the mundane digital literacy practice of using social media at home and moved it into the classroom, allowing students to connect their personal practices to the learnings of the classroom. What is more, as the semester progressed, we observed that the social element of Pronto offered a form of scaffolding for other participatory writing practices in the courses,

including the social media project, podcast, and curation of group writing. While students voluntarily enculturated themselves into the third space via outside-of-class participation and communication over Pronto, we began to question the extent to which we, as educators, needed to take notice of growth, development, and learning as evidence of achievement and thereby worthy of assessment.

Assessment, It's Complicated

One thing that was clear to us before the shift to remote teaching and learning was that assessment within the participatory writing space would require letting go of traditional ideas of “mastery” in favor of valuing emerging discourses and networks of communication (Arroyo, 2013). Partly as a result of the aforementioned, we understood that the assessment of participatory writing would pose a particular set of challenges—but also opportunities. Often, for instance, when we discuss assessment, we discuss the *how*, but what is equally critical when considering participatory writing assessment in remote ESOL contexts is the *what* and *when*—*what* should be assessed and *when* is communication that falls outside the scope of in-class work still evidence of achievement?

Traditionally, assessment is determined by the SLOs of a course and the theories guiding teachers’ pedagogical practices. However, in a participatory classroom where learning is co-constructed and third space discourse communities are created, learning is no longer linear in nature. We argue that within such spaces, the focus is not necessarily on the skill of language use but rather the attainment and use of language within new scenarios. To this end, aligning assessment practices to go beyond skills and measure the use of skills is a challenge.

Considering the *how*, *what*, and *when* was especially notable because specific types of interactions—especially those connected to social writing—defy many standard conceptualizations of assessment. Take, for instance, conversations about projects that moved from the Canvas shell or Zoom room to the Pronto app. How is an educator to take voluntary written communication over an app into account from an assessment standpoint? And how, in a remote context, does an educator quantify or qualify what participation looks like outside their purview even if it connects directly to learning? The aforementioned are important questions and our answers to them are still inchoate. However, our instinct is that one of the reasons assessment is already complicated in the ESOL classroom is because most assessment measures are, by their nature, static, whereas negotiating discourse communities is dynamic. As a result, participatory writing practices amongst emerging multilinguals, especially those carried out in remote spaces, require more dynamic and authentic forms of assessment.

Archbald and Newmann (1988) share that authentic tasks, or tasks which have value beyond the classroom, require authentic assessment practices. Since teaching these courses and reflecting on their outcomes, we have come to focus attention on what authentic assessments may include for participatory classrooms. Burke (1999) shares that authentic assessment practices focus on growth and development, reflection, goal setting, and self-evaluation. Measuring growth and development would support assessing third spaces within the participatory classroom, yet the actual practice within a remote classroom may offer new challenges to consider. For example, one way to measure growth and development is to implement an observation checklist (Burke, 1999), which would require creating criteria for observation purposes. Another potential form of assessment could include conducting discourse analysis over the span of a course (Mayer, 2012). Discourse analysis would require an additional time commitment on the part of the instructor, which may not be realistic or feasible.

Also of interest to us, Stiggins (1994) argues that personal communication is a critical form of classroom assessment and that the process of interviewing students via personal conferences is yet

another potential form of assessing the participatory classroom. Burke (1999) offers that within personal conferences and interviews, a reciprocity of learning occurs for both the instructor and student as the student shares about their learning and the instructor receives feedback about meaningful learning moments. Notably, we had implemented individual conferences over Zoom, though our original intent was to ascertain students' comfort with the broader shift to remote learning and confidence using digital platforms. In hindsight, we believe these conferences functioned as a type of reciprocal space (Burke, 1999).

Moving forward with implementing participatory cultures as the basis of our pedagogical practice, we foresee revising our assessment practices for in-person learning, online learning, and hybrid courses. In the past, we approached the assessment of participatory writing via more traditional methods, including holistic rubrics. This is not to suggest that there were no opportunities for low-stakes, formative feedback: there were. However, our assessment practices were, we realize in hindsight, more static than dynamic. In a future in which educators are likely to teach across the modalities, we think Burke's (1999) concept of measuring growth and development through dynamic and authentic assessment practices like observation checklists should be integrated into all classroom modalities. The aforementioned requires that we redefine existing notions of participation to include constructive engagement, collective actions, and inclusion. Part of that re-definition might include more focus on self-assessment, as that offers students an opportunity to define for themselves how their contributions are valuable to their third space communities. While this admittedly requires some additional sensitivity and nuance on the part of the educator, we believe it can be integrated into all potential classroom modalities.

Navigating Remote Learning Challenges

While we have come to appreciate (and even, in some cases, prefer) certain aspects of remote learning, we also contend that the fully remote learning experience can sometimes foster the more pseudotransactional forms of collaboration of which Wardle and Downs (2020) speak of in their work. The participatory writing projects threaded through these courses were part of our attempt to push back against those pseudotransactional norms. In times that felt genuinely bleak, sustaining and building community seemed to us to be of critical importance. Johnson's (1997) definition of participatory writing asserts that it is never done in isolation, and it was therefore the community aspect of writing that we grasped onto and reinforced.

There are a plethora of participatory writing practices one might engage with while using technology. Some of these practices may appear seemingly mundane on the surface (e.g., composing Tweets, sharing memes across a variety of social media platforms, responding to news articles via digital comment boxes). In this sense, participatory writing practices value the actions and knowledges that ESOL students may already be familiar with when they enter the classroom (Arroyo, 2013). This familiarity has the potential to lead educators into the false sense that implementing digital participatory practices in the classroom may be done with ease, when, in fact, doing so requires significant logistical planning and communication on the part of the instructor (Lancashire, 2009); this is especially true in remote spaces.

Since this was not a formal study, we could not formally query or record our students' experiences and/or perceptions of the courses, but we can speak to what it "felt like" to teach those courses as compared to similar courses we have taught over the years. We can also tell you that, for us, it was hard work. We were extremely cognizant of potential equity issues around technology—and those did manifest, especially toward the beginning of the pandemic as many institutions, including ours, scrambled to get digital devices and Wi-Fi hotspots to students. Like many of our colleagues, we found that the

beginning of the pandemic meant navigating new platforms with which students had varying levels of experience and comfort. Our students were negotiating content creation in English while also learning the structure of multiple platforms—the LMS or video conferencing platform and the hosting site on which the writing was taking place. Even those students who were highly digitally literate faced challenges. We quickly learned, for instance, that even once all of our students had devices and Wi-Fi, some were attending synchronous meetings on their phones, limiting their access to certain features.

All of this necessitated a fair amount of unexpected explicit instruction and “practice” sessions with students. While these sessions were often integrated into instructional time, some voluntary additional practice sessions were offered during our office hours while some sessions were held outside of formal office hours. We discovered that during “pandemic teaching” office hours needed to include evenings and weekends when our students were not monitoring their children’s remote schooling. These sessions, although always voluntary, were crucial in that they allowed us to help support our students in their educational/digital growth and to connect with them on other issues salient to the moment. Students were now, via Zoom, allowing us into their homes. We subsequently learned what other challenges they were experiencing (e.g., food insecurity, anxieties related to illness, and so much more), and we were able to provide resources in response.

This brings us to an additional challenge. On the one hand, we very much wanted to be available to our students (and are glad we were), especially during this tumultuous period, but we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge that the additional hours we put in as educators during that period were difficult. This type of availability may work for the hours of tenure-line faculty (and even then, we must be cognizant of all faculty’s work-life balance needs), but it almost certainly poses issues for adjunct faculty working across multiple institutions and only being paid for a certain number of office hours, if at all (Lederman, 2014). We do not have the solution ironed out for ourselves and will not pretend to have a solution for others, but, as we reflect on our experiences, we believe this is worthy of attention.

Digital equity, or access to devices, applications, software, and stable, secure internet, were made apparent in the remote classroom. As mentioned earlier, many students were not only attending school themselves, but they also had children at home attending distance learning K–12 classrooms. For many students, this placed a burden on the internet usage in the house, causing platforms like Zoom to become sluggish. On multiple occasions, home internet access would fail, leaving students unable to attend synchronous sessions. In these situations, we had to be flexible and work to provide multiple points of access to the learning or be flexible with due dates, as participatory writing practices require the presence of all collaborators. We also discovered that numerous students had access to only one computer at home. For families attempting to work, attend school, and support children, access to the ESOL classroom space—whatever “space” meant at that moment—was at times tenuous and placed strain on students.

While most students needed support in learning how to use platforms like Google Docs and Canvas or initially struggled with Zoom, using platforms which operated similar to or as social media applications did not appear to pose the same level of technical challenges for the students, at least from our vantage point as educators. We suspect that this is related to learned digital behaviors, so while using platforms like Google Docs required a new level of thinking, using applications like Pronto enabled students to pull from existing funds of knowledge about how online messaging and meme sharing function. While Pronto was certainly where we noticed this familiarity the most due to its institutional integration in the courses, it was also apparent in the ease with which students took to the social media scrapbook project. In that project, students created visual stories by pulling images and other posts from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, and more. These platforms and applications did not require the

same degree of instruction because the use of platforms and applications of this type was already a shared social practice which subsequently supported building the participatory culture of the classrooms (Jenkins et al., 2016).

Finally, while the power dynamics of any group have the potential to prove challenging, digital inequities and the prospect of microaggressions and othering in the remote classroom were a serious concern for us as educators who had primarily taught in face-to-face classrooms prior to the pandemic. Ortega et al. (2018) point out that the presence and thereby the associated challenges of these things are a relatively new area of exploration in instructional design; yet the pandemic has compelled us to forefront them. In their discussion of social annotation—one of several participatory writing practices we integrated into our classrooms—Brown & Croft (2020) suggest that power is navigated by the disruptive potential of certain activities (including social annotation) and that these activities, in the ways they are public, are not neutral exchanges of ideas but are instead imbued with power. We agree, and while we did not witness microaggressions or othering in our classrooms, we were nonetheless on alert for them and were highly cognizant of providing safe, inclusive spaces for students to interact, share, and co-create. In the very few instances in which students requested, for example, group or partner changes, we obliged and remained flexible to those requests.

Final Thoughts

This experience hit home for us in one other prominent way. So often, as educators, we thread theory through our practice. We read, we learn, we study, we collaborate—and then, in time, we bring our learnings to the classroom, where we either succeed or fail in implementing them. When the pandemic hit, these norms were turned on their respective heads. Instead of bringing theory to practice, we experimented in the classroom. When we then returned to the literature, we discovered that what we had implemented in class (e.g., social annotation) did not exist in the literature in the form we had found successful. This pushed us as educators. It is easier, we discovered, to pull cookie-cutter methods from textbooks and throw them at our classroom walls to see what sticks. The pandemic did not allow for that. In the end, that was a good thing because we were not simply beholden to what “stuck” but instead saw what might be built atop a strong pedagogical foundation designed around students’ needs and realities.

There were obviously challenges to implementing—and certainly to assessing—participatory writing practices in a remote ESOL classroom space. We worked far more hours than we were paid to work while navigating the realities of the pandemic ourselves. We confronted digital inequities and worried about microaggressions and othering in the online spaces we offered our students. We were forced to remain malleable toward assessing whole categories of work that we had never before considered as evidence of learning (e.g., social interaction via annotation and messaging applications like Pronto). Every bit of this (and more) kept us on our toes. But it was worth it. Incorporating participatory writing practices in the remote ESOL classroom allowed us to integrate language instruction, writing production, and community building toward the co-creation of a third discourse space. Moving forward, we hope to further refine the participatory writing practices we described in this article, especially in the context of remote PBL. Surely, we will continue to discover what it means to write socially and to evaluate work that falls outside the traditional scope of assessment. But that, too, will be worth the effort.

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