

QUESTIONS OF COLLABORATION, ENGAGEMENT, AND BELONGING IN ZOOM AND BLOGS

QUESTÕES DE COLABORAÇÃO, ENGAJAMENTO E PERTENCIMENTO NO ZOOM E EM BLOGS

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ABSTRACT

This piece argues for a combination of synchronous (Zoom) and asynchronous (blogs) classroom activities to in an upper-division writing class, with the goal of creating a space where students connected to peers, the teacher, and their work. Via a review of literature and semi-structured interviews with students, the author argues for a learner-centered approach that allows students to have a meaningful classroom experience during the realities of teaching online during the Covid-19 crisis.

KEYWORDS: Zoom. Collaborative Learning. Writing.

RESUMO

Este artigo defende uma combinação de atividades em sala de aula síncronas (Zoom) e assíncronas (blogs) em uma classe de redação da divisão superior, com o objetivo de criar um espaço onde os alunos se conectem aos colegas, ao professor e ao seu trabalho. Por meio de uma revisão da literatura e entrevistas semiestruturadas com os alunos, o autor defende uma abordagem centrada no aluno que permite que os alunos tenham uma experiência significativa em sala de aula durante as realidades do ensino online durante a crise Covid-19.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Zoom. Aprendizagem colaborativa. Escrita.

INTRODUCTION

In March of 2020 I saw my students in my Writing classes at the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB) for what would be the last time for a long time. Fortunately, at UCSB the change happened right before the final week of classes in the winter quarter of 2020, which initially meant only putting a week's worth of instruction online—then simply grading work through finals week.

I was lucky.

Many writing teachers across the globe had to, as we say in America, make a “quick pivot” to online instruction. I had a week to grade, then a week to plan. But I had a few things going for me.

One, I had previously taught hybrid writing courses before, a blend of online instruction with three face-to-face meetings. Two, I had first started using online technologies to teach college writing classes in 1997 when I built class webpages in HTML 1. Three, I had a talented group of teachers around me willing to share their ideas; I work in a Writing Program at UCSB composed of 40 talented non-tenure track lecturers like me and full tenure track folks.

Also, while I didn't realize it at the time, I had other experience as a researcher and teacher to draw on.

Before teaching college writing, I had been a secondary school history and English language arts teacher, and my training from that time, particularly my reading about collaborative learning, paid off in a big way. In fact, pieces that I read in 1993 about organizing collaborative learning via writing were going to be central to me being able to make the “quick pivot” to fully online learning in about seven days’ time.

What follows is the story of that pivot, particularly the pivot towards using a tool I had not used before: Zoom. This narrative involves the research and reading I have done about teaching online from 1997 to present—focusing on the best practices in online writing instruction; research into my students’ experience with Zoom—particularly with breakout rooms; research into how they used asynchronous tools, specifically a blog in our Moodle based learning management system (LMS) called Gauchospace, and ultimately some provisional ideas about how we can continue to use Zoom and blogs to teach in both online and face-to-face contexts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Computers and Writing Community

In the United States, serious consideration of the ways that computers can and should be used in writing instruction goes back to at least 1979, perhaps earlier (Inman, 2004, p. 108). The field of computers and writing has since then developed important pedagogical principles in its key journals, such as **Computers and Composition** and **Kairos**. Of those principles, one that has guided my and other’s pivot into fully online instruction, was famously articulated by Cinthia Selfe: “Don’t forget about literacy. Humans and human communication, not computers, should be at the center of English classrooms” (1988, p. 70). The point being that we need foreground human connection in our work in an online writing classes—especially in a pandemic that cuts off students from face-to-face connections with the peers and teachers.

The field of computers and writing has been animated by this idea that computers are best used to connect people and make writing a social act, as can be clearly seen in the NCTE statement concerning “Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction (OWI).” This statement has 15 principles across five categories: the “Overarching Principle,” “Instructional Principles,” “Faculty Principles,” “Institutional Principles,” and “Research and Exploration” (CCCC Committee for Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction, 2013). For this discussion I want to focus on three:

- OWI Principle 1: Online writing instruction should be universally inclusive and accessible.
- OWI Principle 3: Appropriate composition teaching/learning strategies should be developed for the unique features of the online instructional environment.
- OWI Principle 11: Online writing teachers and their institutions should develop personalized and interpersonal online communities to foster student success.

The importance of the first principle is, the “Overarching Principle,” and its importance is spelled out in the “Rationale for OWI Principle 1”:

OWI Principle 1 supersedes and connects to every principle in this document. In particular, the Committee believes that the needs of learners with physical disabilities, learning disabilities, multilingual backgrounds, and *learning challenges related to socioeconomic issues [italics mine]* (i.e., often called the digital divide where access is the primary issue) must be addressed in an OWI environment to the maximum degree possible for the given institutional setting. (2013)

I italicized “*learning challenges related to socioeconomic issues*” because one of the key issues that I struggled with as a teacher was how I was going to address the digital divide around issues of internet speed and even raw internet access. A pre-class survey with 33 responses from 50 students revealed that 15% of my students had to access the internet only via their phone and 11% of my students did not have high speed Wi-Fi. Also, only 18.2% of the students had ever taken an online class before. Access was going to be a concern for my students.

OWI Principle 3, that teaching/learning strategies need to be developed for the OWI space was an immediate challenge that every writing teacher across the globe faced as the Covid-19 lockdown started to take hold (CCCC Committee for Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction, 2013). The “rationale” for this principle, as the authors of the document point out that, is that “new pedagogies should be explored and implemented to leverage the inherent benefits of the electronic environment in relation to composition instruction (e.g., discussion boards and *blogs [italics mine]* that allow students to exchange thoughtful claims and support in writing or private messaging that allows students to communicate with one’s teacher through writing)” (CCCC Committee for Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction, 2013). For me, the context of March 2020 to present was, and is, radically different than even the hybrid teaching I had done earlier. It was suddenly difficult for me to build community in my classroom the way that I generally did: by leveraging group work with student-selected groups to create smaller learning communities, which would allow students to feel a sense of belonging and common intellectual purpose. So, I consciously decided that I would create groups of odd numbered students that would work as *blog groups*. Keeping in mind OWI principle 3, that OWI tends to be heavily textual, I wanted to use blogs because with the blog function of our LMS allows students to use a variety of media to create posts. I hoped that posting for each other would create connections among students as well.

This also tied in with OWI Principle 11; in that I needed to “develop personalized and interpersonal online communities to foster student success” (CCCC Committee for Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction, 2013). For me, the blog groups could do that because, as Lee-Anne Kitman Breuch points out in her chapter in **Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction**, “blogs also afford comments from readers about individual blog entries, in effect creating a ‘dialogue’ among readers” (2015, p. 368). It was the “dialogue” between readers/students that I wanted to foster, so that students could create relationships with each other.

Research on Zoom and Our Current Moment in OWI

The success or failure of my classes after March 2020 demanded that I not only think about what the computers and writing community could tell me about successful past practices, I had to also think about the current moment in online instruction. This year demanded that I read whatever I could about Zoom, blogging, and

OWI being published in 2020 and 2021. What strikes me about the research in this area is that a great deal of it comes out of contexts where English is being taught as a foreign language, and much of the information about newer online resources (like Zoom) is heavily focused on the what, not the why, of OWI. There are a few relevant ideas that have informed my approach to working with Zoom:

1. Zoom, despite only becoming a publicly traded company in 2019, has seen use in a number of contexts prior to 2020 (Kelly 2020). Adelina Ruiz-Guerrero (2020) shares that the Language Hub at ITESO, The Jesuit University of Guadalajara, has been using Zoom and an “email desk service” for some time to run conversation clubs that “aim to promote and encourage the use of the languages our students are interested in practicing” (p. 250). Clearly the Language Hub at ITESCO understands that Zoom can effectively foster language work.
2. There is no shortage of “How To” pieces on using everything from Zoom to Google Suite, but connections to writing pedagogy are few and far between. You get lists of what can be done with Zoom, but rarely is writing and language use foregrounded—as you can see in “Pedagogical Considerations for Teaching with Zoom” (2021) from Carnegie Mellon University. This is not a critique of the fine information on this page about using Zoom, but it’s an observation about how there seems to be a focus on the “whatness” of technology, not its “why.”
3. A good deal of the recent research about the effect of the “quick pivot” to OWI has been happening in ESL and EMS programs outside of the United States. Ruiz-Guero (2020) focuses on how her institution used Zoom to help students gain oral language practice, Famularsih (2020) points out that learning is possible via OWI, but that there are technological access barriers to for students during our current pandemic teaching, and Mardiah (2020) shows in her research that, “E-learning seems to be the one and only platform of teaching-learning process in this COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, it cannot replace actual classroom as in conventional classes” (p. 55).

Mardiah’s point that “E-learning cannot replace “conventional classes” is an important one. Mardiah (2020) claims that “The affective domain (attitudes) in education is also an important aspect need [sic] to be encouraged in the success of a learning. Students’ attitude and motivation can be easily monitored and guided in conventional classes. The affective domains of education should be developed side by side with the cognitive and psychomotor domains” (p. 55). The affective domain is something that I was deeply concerned about in terms of purely online instruction, and research, besides Mardiah’s research, shows that this is a problem.

In the still remarkably relevant and thorough **Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction**, Ehmann and Hewett (2015) point out,

The most obvious difference from onsite learning is in the affective realm from the loss of real-time body/face/voice connections where researchers have suggested that such loss interferes with developing classroom community (DePew & Lettner-Rust, 2009; Ehmann, 2010; Gouge, 2009). (pp. 524-525)

Ehmann and Hewett (2015) also mention that research shows that students can develop classroom community, but teachers likely play a large role in fostering interaction between students.

Collaborative Learning Theory as It Applies to Zoom

As a dedicated teacher of writing, my understanding of collaboration in a writing class comes in large part from the work of Kenneth Bruffee. One quote that helps frame my understanding of Bruffee comes at the end of his famous 1984 *College English* article “Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Mankind”:

Organizing collaborative learning effectively **requires doing more than throwing students together with their peers with little or no guidance or preparation.** To do that is merely to perpetuate, perhaps even aggravate, the many possible negative effects of peer group influence: conformity, anti-intellectualism, intimidation, and leveling-down of quality. To avoid these pitfalls and to marshal the powerful educational resource of peer group influence **requires us to create and maintain a demanding academic environment that makes collaboration—social engagement in intellectual pursuits—a genuine part of students’ educational development.** (p. 652)

What I have bolded here in the quote lays out two principles that informed my online writing instruction from March 2020 forward. Collaborative learning means I have to guide and prepare students to do collaborative work in Zoom, and that “social engagement in intellectual pursuits” and “students’ educational development” are the end goals of collaborative learning.

In practice this means that my praxis involved the following: using standing teacher assigned groups. In the research on collaborative learning, which I first encountered as a secondary school teacher candidate in 1993, there are a few key ideas about how to structure collaborative student groups. There is some “research [that] suggests that groups which are assigned by the instructor tend to perform better than self-selected groups” (Burke, 2011, p.90). Thus, I randomly assigned students to groups of five. I’ll now explain why I chose groups of five. In **Teaching Strategies: A Guide to Better Instruction** by Donald Orlich and his co-authors (1990), they make an interesting point about the importance of group size: there is no absolute right number, but there is some reason to believe that an odd number of students of no more than five is an “ideal number” for collaborative discussion groups (p. 231).

So, groups of five seemed ideal for my blog groups (groups of students who would blog together and work in Zoom breakout rooms together), so as to maximize on-task work and create a sense of belonging.

Also, every time students did collaborative work, I gave groups a defined task and role. For any collaborative group work to actually help students learn to write, there needs to be carefully defined and purpose driven tasks (Brama & Biel, 2015). For the collaborative activities I share in my “Results and Discussion” section you can see that they have discrete, definite tasks. And these tasks have two points: to facilitate learning and create classroom community.

METHODS

My research methods are qualitative and rooted in Ruth Ray’s notion of “teacher-research” (1992, p. 172). Ray defines teacher-research as, “systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers,’ where systemic implies methodological data gathering, analyzing, and reporting; intentional means planned rather than spontaneous activity; and inquiry implies a questioning, reflective stance toward teaching and learning” (1992, p. 173). However, in a later publication Ray makes an important ethical point about how teacher-researchers work: “researchers who study schools are accountable *first* to students and the school community and *secondarily* to their academic disciplines” (1996, p. 298).

Thus, my research is centered around semi-structured interview methodology, as well as a deep reflection on my own classroom methods and materials. This reflection foregrounds me being accountable for improving my instructions for my students. In my interviews with three students from a fall 2020 upper-division writing class blog group (Imogen, Beatrice, and Viola) I focused my questions, which are listed below, on getting at student perspectives about my teaching—particularly students’ experiences with Zoom breakout rooms and the blog.

Table 1

Interview Questions

- 1) What were some things you remember doing in your Zoom breakout room sessions in?
- 2) What were some things you remember doing in the blog itself?
- 3) How would you describe the interaction with your peers in the Zoom breakout rooms and blogs in terms of learning?
- 4) How would you describe the interaction with your peers in the Zoom breakout rooms and blogs in terms of a sense of belonging and connection?
- 5) What are some things you took away, as a scholar and graphic designer, from the work in the Zoom breakout rooms and blogs?
- 6) Are there any things you want Chris and others to know about the work done in our breakout sessions and blogs with your blog groups?

Also, since my allegiance is to my students, my school, and improving my instruction of writing, my students will remain anonymous, and I will focus my critique and analysis on my own classroom materials and practices.

Results and Discussion

Classroom Materials: Reflection and Critique

I want to walk through two figures that represent the pedagogy of my use of Zoom breakout rooms and how blogs worked to create productive affiliative spaces.

Zoom Breakout Rooms

Figure 1

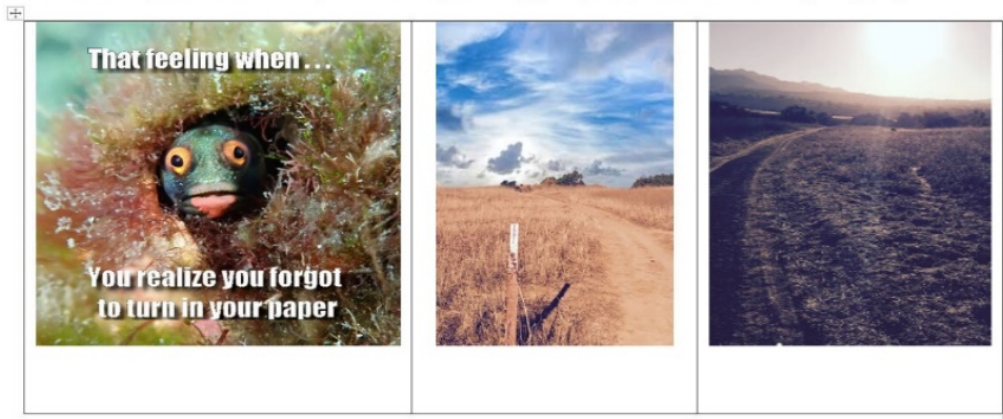
Zoom Breakout Room Work on Aesthetic Values

Zoom Group Work Part Two: Our Aesthetic Values

In your blog groups and in your breakout room, I want you to look at the three designs below and say which ones you prefer and why—**making reference to ANY of our readings to date.**

Think, particularly about Robin Williams, CRAP acronym (Contrast, Repetition, Arrangement, & Proximity) and which images are the most “bold.”

This time, deputize a different person from your blog group to speak on behalf of your group.



When you come back, Chris is going to turn on the white board and copy down some of the larger points you make. Thus, we are going to start to think about how we can, collectively and personally, articulate our design preferences and aesthetics. **This is something you have to do for the Text/Image Project.**

The work represented in this image was done in the third week of a ten-week class. The point was to provide students with multimodal texts from previous student work that would help current students come to some consensus in a Zoom breakout room about a “favorite” image. I asked students to justify their judgment through how the image aligned with Robin William’s notion of C.R.A.P., which stands for contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity (Williams, 2004). Before sending students off to work in Zoom breakout rooms, I told folks that I would be dropping into their discussions to listen and that each group would report out. After the reporting we would create, as a class in the main Zoom session, a list of aesthetic choices in these images that we valued.

The resulting discussion in Zoom breakout rooms, which I overheard was lively and focused. Ultimately, students arrived at 17 discrete preferences and suggestions that ranged from the general, “Be Bold,” to the very particular, “Utilize the rule of thirds with alignment.” What’s important is that students created a document that articulated aesthetic principles that we could agree on, and that 17 out of 25 students contributed to our list. In this instance a well-structured Zoom breakout room resulted in a document that we returned to on two other occasions, it allowed students to do important affiliative work in the breakout rooms, and it created a shared sense of aesthetic values and language around those values.

Blogs and Peer Review

If you ever have taught with Zoom or any other form of video-conferencing, you have likely felt “Zoom fatigue.” Jeremy N. Bailenson (2021) from Stanford University has argued, based on previous research on video conferencing, that Zoom fatigue arises from, “excessive amounts of close-up eye gaze, cognitive load, increased self-evaluation from staring at video of oneself, and constraints on physical mobility,” and that ultimately, “videoconference all day seems particularly exhausting.” Thus, it makes sense to not base an entire class around Zoom alone. Also, as research in Online Writing Instruction makes clear, “The emerging consensus regarding the choice of asynchronous and synchronous modes is that neither is inherently better, but that they complement one another and should be employed after considering the instructional and rhetorical situation of each activity in an OWC” (Snyder Mick & Middlebrook, 2015, p. 137).

It was with this idea I mind, that I decided early on to use blogs. Also, as I mentioned previously, blogs gave students a chance to be in dialogue with each other. To that end, one of the most useful and powerful uses of blogs in my class was having students do peer review via blogs in standing groups. To facilitate that, I gave precise directions that demanded three things from students: 1) That they ask specific questions of peers, 2) That they frame their response to peer’s and my questions in terms of “I statements” that Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff (1989) would recognize from their seminal work on peer review *Sharing and Responding* , 3) and that they only do items one and two after practicing giving feedback in class with previous student work. Below is the blog prompt I created to guide students through responding to each other, and I also made an instructional video that walked students through the process from a technical standpoint:

Figure 2

Blog Group Work



Week Four Blog Prompt–Peer Review!

by Chris Dean

Visible to participants on this course

The Why and How of Our Peer Review and the Week Three Blog Post

Today we are going to do peer review of each other's work in the blog, and to make this both engaging and useful, you need to keep a few things in mind: **one**, the writer is in charge—so start with the writer's questions to you; **two**, peer review is about personal reactions formulated using this phrase, "*I . . . because. . .*"; **three**, be honest and kind and write a lot—at least five sentences for every question. **We are doing these things to make sure that folks have something to respond to, and everything that we are doing is based in research on student peer review going back to the 1960s.** (*Incidentally, I wrote my dissertation on peer review in 2000. Student peer review is a career long interest of mine.*)

The Directions

1. For Wednesday: Post, as attachments, your first two images to your blog. Also, write down **two to three questions**, that you want answered in the "**Message**" section of the post. Also, paste in the required questions, which are written below:
2. Consider William's notion of CRAP from page 13 of Williams (Contrast, Repetition, Alignment, & Proximity); now, what do you see, in terms of CRAP, that your peer could do to improve upon his/her piece? Be specific and be ready to *literally point* at elements of your peer's design.
3. What is one specific element about this piece that is really working right now, and why do you feel it is really working?
4. What is one specific change that could help your peer more effectively render his or her writing process right now?
5. By Sunday: Write your response **to two people's pieces**, answering all of their questions. For each question, you should write a paragraph of **at least** three to five sentences. When you are done writing your **two responses**, make sure that you, as a **comment on your own post**, write down what are **three to five changes** that you could do to make this piece stronger by the time it is due—**this doesn't have to be more than a list**. I WANT YOU TO A HAVE PLAN FOR REVISION OF YOUR WORK!

[Permalink](#) [Edit](#) [Delete](#) [Add your comment](#)

As you will see when we look at the interviews, I conducted with students in a particular blog group, students valued the responses that they received from peers.

Student Interviews

I interviewed three students (Viola, Imogen, and Beatrice) from a five-member blog group. This blog group worked well together in general, and their work is emblematic of what good work might look like in a standing group in an online writing class. Looking across transcripts of the three interviews, a few themes are evident about students work in Zoom breakout rooms and their blogs.

First, peer review was valued by this group. Viola mentioned that "It was very beneficial for me to hear from different people, some who would give more positive feedback and some who would criticize me more, so that it was easier to grow in the class. Because, especially in multimedia writing, I had never done anything like that, and I didn't know how to do graphic design at all. So in the end, I was more impressed with my work when I had that kind of peer review." Variations on this theme come across in all of the interviews. Students valued both

praise and critique of their work, and they saw value in using that feedback to help rework their pieces, which they could do because of the process-based writing structure of the class.

Second, it was clear that students felt connected to the class and to each other. When asked about if they felt a sense of belonging in their blog group, Beatrice mentioned: “I really felt like I really did belong to that blog group. I felt like I belonged to the class.” As Jackson, Cashmore, & Scott (2010) remind us a sense of belonging isn’t a nice add on to instruction in an online writing space: it is the reason that learning happens in any space. This means that, at least in some provisional way, the structured work in breakout rooms and blogs worked.

Third, students made it clear that when they worked in Zoom breakout rooms, they felt they could discuss things freely. Viola, Beatrice, and Olivia all saying that they felt either “free” or “safe” to offer up opinions, suggestions, or ask questions for clarification. This sort of free and open interaction is what Jeffrey Cornelius-White (2007) and many others would call a “learner-centered” instruction. Also, the learner-centered work that happened in this class helped students feel confident about doing “creative work” that challenged them. Imogen put this perfectly when she said, “I think that, especially with creative work, confidence is everything.” It’s this sort of “earned confidence,” coming from peers, that I wanted students to experience in their work in blogs and Zoom breakout rooms, so that they could push themselves to take creative risks in their work.

Finally, one thing that emerged from the conversations was that students valued the structure of the tasks, particularly the peer review tasks. If you look at Figure 2 you will notice that there are five short, discrete steps that guide students’ peer review work. Also, I used a predictable, weekly pattern to the course, which meant students posted blogs to our LMS on Wednesday and had to respond to each other by Sunday. This always held true, even with doing peer review, and I did this because research indicates that a predictable pattern of assignments and responses helps students learn in online writing classrooms (Warnock, 1995; Meloncon and Harris, 1995). This predictability was appreciated by all three students, with Viola articulating saying, “This was one of the only classes I’ve taken online that I actually felt like I was like constructively learning. There were so many different forms of learning. It wasn’t just zoom and then like an essay or something. It was like the videos and the breakout rooms. So I just really liked the structure of it.” The class, with its blend of Zoom meetings and asynchronous blog posts, allowed students to feel connected to peers, me, and their work.

Final Considerations

Before summing up and trying to tease out lessons learned, I want to point out the limitations of my research. My research is based on case studies and reflection, and is from a teacher-researcher perspective. So, there are limits in terms of how much one should generalize from my findings about the use of Zoom and blogs during pandemic teaching.

That said, this is a singular time in the teaching of writing, and there is probably some value in my students’ singular experiences with my online writing class. Also, working from a teacher-researcher position means that you have to argue for the particular and for the pedagogical value of your research, which I’m willing to do.

One of the largest lessons learned from March 2020 to March 2021 about using Zoom and blogs in a writing class is that both synchronous and asynchronous modalities allow for peer-to-peer connection and important learning to happen. However, as the research on collaborative writing makes clear (Bruffee, 1984; Brame, 2015, Burke, 2011) this work needs to be organized by a thoughtful teacher with end goals in mind. My approach, to use standing groups of odd numbered students is backed by pedagogical research (Orlich, 1990; Brame, 2015), and my students seemed to value having a group of folks to consistently respond too.

I believe that one of the reasons they appreciated having a standing group to work with was because students “got to know” each other, and this is connected to a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging is, as Jackson, Cashmore, & Scott (2010) make clear, is “one of the most important needs for all students to function well *in all types of learning environment* [emphasis added]” (Qtd in Peacock & Cowan, 2019, p. 68). This sense of belonging and connection to fellow students was also something that was often absent during my students pandemic learning. Research done at UCSB via Institutional Planning Research and Assessment (2020) indicates that 18% of students in all of their classes always felt it was clear how to communicate with their peers. This large-scale survey (10% of our 23,196 undergraduate students) makes it clear that there is a degree of disconnection between students and their peers during the fall quarter of 2020, and this disconnect is likely still extant as we approach the spring quarter of 2021.

The danger of disconnection is important to combat pedagogically because writing teachers need to create online writing classes that “foster student success” (CCCC Committee for Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction, 2013). Part of fostering this success is realizing that we need to teach in a way that takes into account the gross inequity of access to internet resources, particularly hi-speed wi-fi. At UCSB only 51% of all the undergraduate surveyed by Institutional Research Planning and Assessment at UCSB had “Reliable broadband (fast) internet access” (2020). Thus, I think that there will continue to be a need to use low-bandwidth technologies, like blogs, along with figuring out what to do when students cannot use synchronous, real-time technologies that foster belonging and connection because of internet access issues.

What I can ultimately offer up is this: giving students access to Zoom breakout rooms can experience engaged learning and reinforce a sense of belonging—particularly when paired with an asynchronous technology that fosters dialogue, like blogging. Students can do productive, meaningful writing if we, as teachers, plan for it and take active, pedagogical steps to create a classroom community in cyberspace.

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