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Drop Everything and Read and Write by Hand: Reimagining In-Person Instruction in the Wake of COVID-19

NOAH E. BORRERO AND ELEANOR SCOTT

We are excited about being back in the classroom after the COVID-19 shutdown. Live, in-person instruction is what drew us to the teaching profession and what sustains us as educators. We believe that deep, meaningful, critical learning happens best in and through relationships, and we feel that these relationships can flourish in the context of school classrooms. We are also concerned. We know that this transition from remote to in-person instruction in many K-12 classrooms signals a return to normal schooling, and we fear that the myriad inequities and injustices that plague our educational system—whether instruction is remote or in-person—will intensify. The tension created through these feelings of excitement and concern drives us to reimagine our classroom instruction in this moment and into the future. As language arts teachers, this reimagination involves a focus on our K-12 students' lived experiences and critical literacies as central texts in our curriculum.

Our reimagination is rooted in our experiences as K-12 students, classroom teachers, and teacher educators. We have contributed to and benefitted from the generative possibilities of in-person learning (Borrero, et al, 2020). We have

also contributed to and felt the pain from the isolation and silencing that the assimilationist agendas of traditional schooling proliferate (e.g. Camangian & Cariaga, 2021; Emdin, 2016). And this pain is felt daily by so many students, sometimes in big ways, sometimes in small but endless ways (Dumas, 2014). In our current roles as public K-12 teachers and teacher educators, we acknowledge that deep, institutional change must occur in our nation's classrooms. Our system is broken, and while the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to shine a spotlight on the structural inequities inherent in traditional schooling, the reality is that these inequities are perennial and existed long before our current societal (educational, social, political, health, etc.) crises. We believe that there is opportunity amidst this significant educational transition, and the time for this change is now (e.g. Kumashiro, 2020; Love, 2020).

In this paper, we reflect on our attempts to reimagine our own teaching as we re-embark on in-person instruction in the English language arts (ELA) classroom. We share an example from our teaching—a project entitled “On the Daily Cards”—as a way to examine nonlinear and creative ways for students to read and write about their lived experiences outside of the classroom amidst the ongoing

challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through providing a theoretical framework and examples from our classrooms, we attempt to interrogate the old idea that learning only happens in schools. We explore the cultural lives and vibrant stories of K-12 students—stories that can become ELA texts and literacy tools in the live classroom space.

A Call for Change

During the initial months of school closures and the transition to remote instruction, Arudhati Roy (2020) expressed, “Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to “normality”, trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality” (3). The doomsday machine that we have created in our public schools in the U.S. is a system that values, promotes, and reproduces whiteness and monolithic hierarchies. As teachers, it is our job to understand the cultural and historical realities of school as an oppressive space for many young people (e.g. Ayers et al., 2018) and to resist their proliferation moving forward. In the current

moment—embracing the excitement of a return to in-person instruction and the concern of a return to normal—this means that we must interrogate our own beliefs, assumptions, and practices as teachers (Camangian, 2013). We need to reflect deeply upon our learnings from the past 18 months and ensure that our pedagogies showcase and promote new possibilities for meaningful, equitable education in our classrooms. We do not underestimate the challenges of this reimagination in our teaching, and we certainly know that our most important learnings come through engaging with and listening to our K-12 students. Now is the time to truly ask, what is the purpose of school?

If we bravely ask this question, we attempt to create possibilities for transforming our excitement to dynamic action. Reading and critical thinking are foundations of the ELA classroom—we seek ways to use the momentum from our enthusiasm to act and do different things in the learning space. And with the same excitement for newness and healing we understand that there will be moments, possibly many, when the inspiration is scattered or not being met with fervor and enthusiasm. We cannot see this as a reason to stop. In many ways it is a push to continue—a chance to talk to friends and check in with our trusted colleagues—so-called students—because their experiences are what must guide us.

We also turn to the wisdom of our educational elders—Gloria Anzaldúa, Paulo Freire, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Sonia Nieto, among others—to ground us in the belief that education is a tool for social transformation. As a part of a broadly-defined educational system, schooling is a space for generative interaction and dialogue about our communities and the ways we can help shape them. Given the ongoing impacts

of the COVID-19 pandemic on our communities and the forced transition to remote-learning for much of the past school year, it is vital to rethink how we can best seize the opportunities that exist amidst the sea change our schools are experiencing. Recently, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2021) called for a “hard re-set” in education—a new beginning in K-12 schooling where business as usual does not exist. We agree with this call and we want to be a part of the substantive change that this re-set can offer. As classroom teachers, we ask, what can this re-set look like in the K-12 classroom? In an attempt to build upon the foundations of culturally relevant pedagogy that Ladson-Billings (2021) provides, we propose a theoretical framework that is rooted in the cultural assets of students and their communities and we present a pedagogical example from our classroom to share part of our journey towards reimagining in-person instruction in the ELA classroom.

Theoretical Framework

We need much more than “reform.” We need a paradigm shift in our concept of education. We must view the movement to transform our schools as just as vital to our twenty-first-century humanity as the civil rights movement was to our twentieth-century humanity. (Boggs & Kurashige, 2012, p. 136)

In the wake of COVID-19 school closures and with the deepening of racial disparities in this country, part of the force that will cause this shift must be powered by love and discernment. In order to discern, and catch, for instance, when whiteness co-opts space, time, language and energy, we need prodigious intellectual tools and critical thinking/creativity. In order to topple monoliths of oppression, we need the

force of love manifested in restorative justice practices, trauma-informed pedagogy, and resources of well-being and community care. Currently, the model of public education in our country is based on the factory (Ayers et al., 2018). Like factories that produce millions of copies of the same thing, schools churn out scholars that are the same with roughly the same abilities. What if, rather than factories, learning communities are more like forests? What if we think about ecosystems rather than machines and mechanisms and productivity?

Ecological and sociocultural foundations. Our work as teacher-scholars involves continual self-reflection about what matters most to us as learners and teachers. From this perspective, our experiences during the forced transition to remote instruction were challenging. Namely, as teachers we missed being with our students. As the months of teaching on zoom continued, we shared some incredibly engaging and powerful interactions and found productive new tools, but we admittedly still missed live interaction. Some of our students shared this longing and others seemed to embrace (and even thrive in) the new reality of a virtual classroom. As we reflect upon this past year and a half, we understand that it is important to push our own perspectives about remote instruction and realize that the classroom is forever changed as a result of COVID-19. And, this is a good thing.

Theoretically, a part of this reckoning is grounded in our application of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) to our work as teachers. Namely, our environments—our ecological systems—changed. Our bedrooms became our classrooms. We interacted with school, friends and family through zoom. And we engaged

in exponentially fewer in-person social activities. From an ecological perspective, this forced isolation impacted our learning in concrete ways. For example, we know that learning takes place within and across our intersectional identities (Anzaldúa, 1984) and aspects of our identities were altered—if not completely stunted—when we transitioned to remote teaching. So, it was not only our curriculum that needed to be modified for online teaching. Our conceptualizations of what it means to be a teacher needed a re-set.

More specifically, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) proposes that our environments consist of reciprocal and interrelated layers of our development (see Berk, 2000). At the core of our application of ecological systems theory is the belief that the interactions across these layers matter. Our cultural, lived experiences intersect across multiple layers of our identities. Culture is fluid and evolving, so the dynamism of our lived experiences is vital to our teaching and learning. We rely on ecological theory to stress the idea that these interrelated systems survive (and thrive) when they are supporting one another. For symbiotic support to occur within and across ecological systems, we need relationships, we know this to be true on many levels—we strive to get to build community so we all know and care for each other in order to learn from and with one another (e.g. Camangian, 2013). There is no doubt that the social isolation that occurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and forced distance learning strained these relationships.

To focus more specifically on teaching and learning, we connect our ecological systems approach to sociocultural foundations of learning theory. We attempt to build upon Nieto's

(2002) application of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) as a grounding for meaningful pedagogy in learning contexts comprised primarily of students of Color. Nieto (2002) highlights the core of sociocultural learning theory—learning is relational and it happens within cultural contexts—while also applying it to the rich and complex identities of her students. That is, cultural identities are central to meaningful learning. In the context of school, it becomes the job of the teacher to provide learning opportunities in which students can explore and express their cultural experiences and connect them to their lives in the classroom. Too often, such connections are only fostered for white students or students who have been forced to choose separate identities at home and at school (e.g. Picower, 2021).

As a metaphor for envisioning the application of sociocultural learning theory in urban classrooms—classrooms with primarily working-class, students of Color—Nieto (2002) portrays a bridge. This bridge connects students' academic identities (their experiences in classrooms and school contexts) with their cultural identities (their experiences with family and community members). Essential is the bi-directionality of this bridge. It must connect these spaces, but it must also respect and support these spaces. Too often, the direction of this bridge—or the purpose of this connection—is only seen as valuable if it is in service of predetermined school-based outcomes like getting homework done, passing tests, and sitting quietly and attentively in class (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). This unidirectionality reinforces the monolithic, racist, white assumptions of schooling and it directly contradicts the foundations of sociocultural learning theory.

In our teaching and scholarship, we attempt to draw connections between ecological and sociocultural theories to make the clear case that our students are learning all of the time—within and beyond school contexts. There are teachers everywhere. Their cultural lives and experiences matter, and if we are to truly apply established foundations of contemporary learning theory, our jobs as teachers include fostering students' identities across the multiple learning contexts they navigate daily. The school classroom (and most recently the zoom classroom) is just one of these learning contexts and for students to thrive, the classroom must be a part of their more extensive ecological system (e.g. Lee et al., 2002). As a part of reimagining our in-person instruction, we acknowledge that some students struggled through aspects of remote learning while others thrived. Part of our task moving forward is to listen to and learn from students about ways we can create experiences in the classroom that honor these differences. And, to truly build upon the theoretical foundations above in the ELA classroom, we must foster students' lived experiences and stories as vibrant, meaningful texts that must be a part of our daily teaching and learning.

Cultural relevance and assets. As a part of Ladson-Billings' (2021) call for a hard re-set in education, she firmly grounds her analysis in the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy: student learning, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. We feel that our ecological, sociocultural approach to learning and teaching supports this foundation. Particularly in light of the significant changes to our educational system brought on through the global health crisis in relation to COVID-19, we feel that the very idea of relevance is ephemeral. The world continues to rapidly shift in unforeseen ways, and as

we re-engage in-person instruction, this dynamism must be acknowledged and harnessed.

In an attempt to build upon Ladson-Billings (1995, 2021) culturally relevant pedagogy and to acknowledge the varied and fluid cultural contexts that K-12 students are navigating daily, we have developed a framework for identifying and fostering students' cultural assets (Borrero & Yeh, 2021). We honor scholarly and pedagogical approaches such as funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005); *carino* (Valenzuela, 1999), and reality pedagogy (Emdin, 2016) as part of an ideological stance in direct opposition to the decades of research and teaching that focus on the supposed educational deficits of students of Color (Picower, 2021).

Our cultural assets framework is grounded in these theoretical traditions and a part of our experiences as K-12 teachers. Cultural assets are strengths that students possess and bring with them to the classroom (Borrero & Yeh, 2016), and they are also ways of being that young people enact and contribute to as members of families and communities. We strive to contribute to this research by framing cultural assets as actions and experiences as much as they are traits and traditions. Cultural assets are both nouns and verbs.

As such, we conceptualize the varied lived experiences of working-class students of Color as complex and interwoven. The fluidity of students' cultural assets is on display daily, as they navigate distinct and disparate cultural realities. The idea that school is just one such context is important in our framework and brings us back to the importance of ecological systems theory. For students to thrive, there must be connectivity within and across

different systems (i.e. cultural contexts). We believe that a starting point for enhancing such connectivity is through identifying and fostering the cultural assets that students experience and possess.

Our Approach as Teacher-Scholars

As authors, we are connected through our K-16 teaching experiences with a focus on middle and high school ELA classrooms. Our own passions and experiences as K-16 teachers center the explorations of pedagogies that foster the cultural assets of youth—particularly youth in public K-12 schools. The examples below come from our teaching over the past 12 months with a focus on the transition from full-time Zoom teaching to in-person instruction. More specifically, details from a recent curricular project—On the Daily Cards—stem from experiences from online and in-person classroom experiences for middle and high school students in our local district. Our goals in sharing these experiences are to highlight concrete interventions of reimagined in-person instruction. With these interventions, like all change, we discuss some of the tensions that arose in the context of our current pedagogical reality.

Reimagination in Practice

Given the tensions we are experiencing as teachers transitioning back to in-person instruction and our commitment to fostering the cultural assets of our students, our pedagogy needs to shift. We embrace the opportunities to connect with our students daily in the classroom and we also know that we cannot resort to teaching and curricula as they existed before the pandemic. There is too

much at stake and the possibilities are too meaningful to be ignored. The pedagogical ideas described below are examples of our attempts to reimagine in-person instruction in this time of transition. These classroom projects, of course, are not silver bullets—the challenges that we face as teachers and students during this transition are complex and intricately bound to the myriad systemic inequities and injustices that are a part of the fabric of public schooling in the U.S. Instead, these classroom projects are presented as possibilities for ways to engage and explore the lived experiences of K-12 students as we reconnect through live interaction in the classroom space.

Further, we do not tout these ideas as best-practices or exemplars of culturally relevant pedagogy. It is our hope that through sharing these classroom ideas, we portray some of the challenges and opportunities that we see before us as we re-engage in classroom learning. In this moment, we feel that there is clarity about the need for reimagination and a “hard reset” (Ladson-Billings, 2021) in the ways we envision classroom instruction—the question becomes, what can this look like? Below are our attempts to share some specific examples from our reimagined in-person instruction.

On The Daily Cards

Project overview. When the lockdown began, there was a desire to address vast inequities in terms of which families had access to wifi and devices for distance learning. As teachers, one way we have adapted literacy instruction to these changing and multi-modal learning spaces is On the Daily Cards (OtDC)—a deck of ideas. OtDC is a curricular offering to inspire youth (and families) to turn

away from the screen and turn away from the traditional and erroneous assumption that teachers are only found in schools. The deck of cards centers students' lived experiences as texts worth writing, reading, and sharing. Essential questions behind the creative prompts on each card are: Who are the brilliant teachers, human and non-human, at home, in your neighborhood? And, did you know you are a brilliant teacher? OtDC is part of a larger, year-long literacy project meant to break apart the strong box of normality and teacher-centered texts in the ELA classroom. And now, with the return to in-person learning, a new goal of OtDC is to bring literacy practices back into the body ("Write By Hand" "Read a book" "Go for a walk" "Let's Cook" "Write a Letter to a Hero"). To date, there are forty-seven hand-drawn cards and nine blank cards (to create your own) in total and they each contain a prompt for reading, writing, and/or thinking that is associated with the drawing (See [On the Daily](#) for examples).

The main goals of OtDC are to generate daily practices and spaces for classroom communities to creatively reflect on their learning experiences. This project seeks to: 1. Find prompts and tasks that celebrate the brilliance of all and disrupt the idea of normality in the classroom, 2. Help youth recognize their own brilliance and concurrently prove that their brilliance matters. 3. Offer authentic choice to youth in terms of what they learn. For example, one card reads, "Drop Everything and Read or Draw." Another card invites someone to "Record a conversation of the different voices in your head" and contains cartoon word-bubbles with different ideas to get started. Another card has, "Pause...Do what you need to do in order to be present." Given

the focus on hand drawn, nonlinear, choice-based learning, the cards can hopefully interrupt how critical thinking and learning has been delivered to learning cohorts.

Each day, as a class, we visit OtDC. This can range from the teacher choosing a random card at the start of class as a warm up activity, to having students choose their own cards, to students designing their own card, to preparing a lesson/activity based on a prompt/theme from multiple cards. The idea is to take time—every day—to connect and reflect through sharing our own experiences through some of the ideas presented on the cards. And in working through the cards, the joy, the calm, the introspection of reading books and writing down our thoughts become rejuvenative as opposed to punitive. The blank cards are meant to show how the project is purposefully open-ended and fluid—the creation of more cards is always an option. In these ways, the cards are designed to look more like a nonlinear deck of wellness and creativity cards prompting students to recognize, reflect upon, and write about their own lived experiences as dynamic texts.

Reflections from experiencing OtDC in person. It is an interesting paradox of school during and after the lockdown that we are simultaneously yearning for excitement and stimulation and easily fatigued by social interactions. Being back in a classroom, sitting with peers (students and teachers) is both a marvel and exhausting. As we presented OtDC in-person for the first time, new tensions arose. Instead of thinking about priorities of creativity and reflection, we felt the pressure to deliver content, manage time, and work on classroom community agreements.

With a classroom full of students,

there were (of course) more people involved and we felt the pressure to "get things done." And because we misinterpreted some of our own excitement for stamina at certain points, we gave students all 48 cards at once. While some students were very engaged, some students found the cards overwhelming. They portrayed these feelings in different ways—from expressions of boredom, to sarcasm, to starting conversations with neighbors. We realized we needed to do a much better job of scaffolding the project. We realized we needed to model our own engagement with the cards. And, we realized that we needed to start by using just 1-2 cards at a time. In general, we learned that we needed to re-assess our own expectations and let students engage in the multiple layers of the prompts on the cards as opposed to rushing into creative writing and forced critical thinking.

For example, many of the cards focus on reading and journaling but we found that there was a post-lockdown conundrum associated with our expectations for student journaling. While there was an immense desire to do anything but Zoom, we needed to be more deliberate about what it meant to begin again, to reimagine our reading practices and habits. We needed to give journaling more time and we needed to provide very specific examples and prompts. At times we realized the need for sentence-starters and read-alouds of our own journaling. Really, we realized that we are out of reading and writing shape.

Another important reflection from our initial attempts with in-person OtDC is that students were able to show vulnerability while naming their current social and cultural realities. While young people resisted at times and certainly pushed back,

the reality is that youth get it. Their brilliance, when it shines, is contagious and once a few students started expressing excitement about the cards, others joined. We learned that when youth have space and time to celebrate their own and others creativity, scores on tests and points for participation become distant memories. Their genius is bigger than the sky—and for some, the cards brought this out. For example, when asking a high school class, who are the non-human teachers in your world and what do they teach, a brilliant young scholar stated, “Social media. It can teach you to hate yourself or it can teach you to love yourself.” She went on to provide specific details about the ways that her own identities are often shaped by daily postings—her own, her peers, and even people she has never met before. This ability to self-reflect while also naming and critiquing the cultural contexts around them was a constant asset exhibited by students. In this way, their brilliance was allowed to shine. Yet youth, especially multiply-marginalized youth, are silenced every day at school, so that they don’t always recognize or believe in their own true genius. They don’t see their own stories as worthy texts and they don’t see their abilities to read the world as important literacies.

Discussion

The U.S. is slowly transitioning out of lockdown. Students and educators are crawling and creaking out from under the enormous and spirit-harming weight of five to six hours of Zoom school. Students and teachers are healing from sadness and isolation. There is much talk amongst educators and students about the concerns of learning loss that occurred during the pandemic. However, the lessons learned

while navigating a world-wide health pandemic, a year-long lockdown, massive loss of life and growing awareness of systematic injustice, and managing the on-going trauma connected to all that, far outweighs pre-determined grade-level standards and curricula.

There has, in fact, been learning loss (e.g. Dorn et al., 2021). But this learning loss is not solely a result of the lockdown. It has been happening continually before COVID-19. Children and youth have experienced intergenerational learning loss because of the patriarchal, cis-gendered, able-bodied, Eurocentric doomsday machine we refer to as public schools (Love, 2020). We are at a point of equipoise. We can either slump back into the ‘normality’ of standardized learning, or we can open the door to a re-imagining and change the way students and teachers set up learning spaces.

Implications

Your teachers
Are all around you.
All that you perceive,
All that you experience,
All that is given to you
or taken from you,
All that you love or hate,
need or fear,
Will teach you...
(Butler, 1998)

Reading Butler’s (1998) work as we come back into the classroom, into the school buildings, offers a jarring mirror of our current reality—We are all still wearing masks and watching the news about new COVID variants. In California, we are fighting terrible droughts and a seemingly perennial fire season. So, the rhyming with a good

number of plot points in Butler’s fierce and dystopian novel inspires many gasps of recognition. This heightens the importance of legitimate action from conscious re-imagined learning spaces.

Because of familiarity with this novel and the, at times painful, discomfort of going back into the classroom, there is a trap. We need to be wary of the trap of normality (Roy, 2020) and returning to familiar, standardized schooling that would squander the chance for re-imagining to become active in learning spaces. When we hear the jangling, all too familiar threat of punishment when a teacher says: “OK. Come on. Sit back down so we can finish the lesson” we must stop. Hearing that set up for the standard structure of “as a white older person I have something to teach you, younger people.” When in fact, we all, young and old, are experiencing the impacts of the pandemic; we all figured out how to make it through initial school lockdowns, and we can all share what worked when we were in such isolation. We all have something to teach each other. And we are all likely feeling some sense of tension between the excitement and concern of a return to in-person instruction.

If we are to heed Ladson-Billings’ (2021) call for a hard re-set in education and bring about the change that Roy (2020) urges, we need to embrace this tension and breathe into it. We need to listen to young people and give them the chance to reflect, share stories, and listen to one another. OtDC is one of many, many ways to do this as ELA teachers. It is not perfect nor prescriptive. It does, however, push us beyond questions and assumptions about grade level standards because it places students’ lived experiences as central texts in our classroom and

seeks new topics of exploration. In fact, the best cards in OtDC are still to be created. More specifically, for example, one possibility is to dream about and create a new card about how to connect instruction about the use of a comma or what is the first-person voice. Or, perhaps an even better option is to put that very question out to the brilliant young scholars in the classroom: “Hey you all, if you were teaching a group of younger students the difference between first person and third person narrative, how would you teach it? Is there a card we can use (or create) to introduce it?” Ultimately, OtDC is in its infancy. It is an idea of how we’ve attempted to reimagine some of our teaching as we re-enter the classroom. And, like all of our teaching, it is flawed.

When we make this kind of offer we could be met with “I don’t want to do that, that is too much work!” And rather than panicking and throwing our hands up, we can take this behavior as information. It is likely that our younger scholars are feeling pressure and tension in this moment too. The world is changing before our very eyes and the continued re-entry to school classrooms is going to be challenging for all of us. Maybe it’s time to try something different. We could all go outside and take a walk. We could all get a book or a drawing pad or collage materials and be quiet together; rest together. We could put together a relaxing playlist of music with a favorite song from everyone in the circle. We could share hopes for the day. Or, if we could not come to a consensus, we could all work quietly to design a new On the Daily Card and then share it with a friend in class or at home.

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