When the Classroom Becomes a Screen: Finding Our Talent
Zones for Teaching

Beatrice Mendez Newman
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

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O
n the second day of a first-year writing class, I launch our school memoir unit. Students have brought artifacts that symbolize memorable lessons connected to a school space. I spot a violin, medals, certificates, letterman jackets, sports equipment, and framed photographs. In a few days, these artifacts will shape the core of a school memoir as the students, most of whom are still in high school, write their first essay in our face-to-face class.

Three-fourths of the students will earn dual enrollment credit, while the rest are university-level students working on a major or minor. The dual enrollment program is part of a high school to university partnership. The classes are held on the university campus, taught by university professors in general education courses. We integrate the high school students fully into the college class curriculum. Through the dual enrollment partnership, our goal is to provide students from underserved communities an early start toward their pursuit of a college degree.

Javier (pseudonym), a high school junior, holds a shiny, eighteen-inch trophy and gets our writing dialogue rolling. He says, “Pues, I’m in the bleachers, and Mr. A. says, ‘Mi’jo, you wanna do number sense?’ I say, ‘sure’ because I have time before my event, so I do it. Later, come to find out I win first place.” He has confidently code-switched, recognizing the receptive ambiance of our bilingual-rich class.

Javier’s classmates laugh. Most of them are from his high school and are familiar with the story of the accidental number sense win in the local district’s University Interscholastic League competition.

“What’s so funny?” I ask.

Javier smiles, shrugs humbly, “I wasn’t there for number sense. I won anyway!”

The class erupts in more laughter. I take a picture of Javier holding his trophy. A few days later, Javier writes an essay about taking chances and finding hidden potential. Moments like this one are great teaching and learning times. In Javier’s and the other students’ school memoir essays, I recognize that our class community fosters their growth and confidence as writers. I recognize that Daniela’s words resonate with us and that writing is about sharing truths.

By mid-March of 2020, these shared, spontaneous moments of class engagement and community were altered when my students and I transitioned to screen-driven, online instruction. We lost our classroom of whiteboard tables where students sketched cartoons to illustrate brainstorming and practiced individual and team writing with peer feedback. We let go of the moments in which we shared laughter or tears. We gave up eureka moments from our writing workshops. Like my teaching colleagues throughout the United States, I miss my students and our
classroom space. In the unanticipated, widespread reality of online teaching, we must find new ways of reaching our students.

In this article, I present a story of change and adaptation for teaching writing online. In the sudden shift to online instruction, I struggled to preserve the best of my teaching and to safeguard a learning space that allows students to find and share their truths. My discussion illustrates how my talent zones of writing with students, creating micro lessons, using mentor texts, and offering feedback were redesigned for teaching writing online.

MAKING THE CHANGE
The energy in face-to-face teaching varies from one class to the next. In fact, not every teaching day is marked by moments like the exchanges between Javier and his classmates. Classes sometimes include instances of sagging energy, growing confusion, or derailed lessons. As experienced teachers of English language arts (ELA), we know how to steer back toward the lesson and how to move students toward learning and understanding. Most of us are experts in creating vibrant, energetic classroom spaces. Now, we wonder how, or if, the best of our teaching can transfer to online environments.

As I redesigned my writing classes, I let the words of Scott Warnock resonate throughout my restructuring of favorite lessons: “[T]eaching online, like teaching onsite, is about recognizing your teaching talent zones or areas and finding ways to translate those talents to the teaching environment in which you are working” (xiv). I defined my talent zones as specific teaching I did well, perhaps exceptionally well, in face-to-face classrooms and that I wanted to preserve in online teaching. Talent zones became nonnegotiable strategies that had to carry over into online writing instruction and reflected my successes as a teacher (see Table 1).

Writing zones are instructor-specific. Each of us has talents that reflect our years of classroom successes, reconstructions based on experience, new learning each time we read a new book on teaching, and adjustments to reflect what our students need.

### Table 1: My Talent Zones

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<tr>
<th>Talent Zone</th>
<th>Face-to-Face Teaching</th>
<th>Online Teaching</th>
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| Writing with My Students | I write in my class spiral notebook at the document camera for an immediate demonstration.  
  I compose on screen at the computer, doing a think-aloud as I write.  
  I write spontaneous examples at the whiteboard with students asking questions or offering suggestions. | I join in the class community of writers by doing every writing task along with students. |
| Creating Micro Lessons | I use mini-lessons with time for practice and sharing.                             | I create video micro lessons focused on a specific learning outcome.            |
| Responding to Mentor Texts | I do read-alouds of mentor texts.  
  Working in groups, students share golden lines from the texts. | I introduce mentor texts in book talk-type video lessons or written lessons.    |
| Providing Extended Feedback | I circulate among groups or independent writers during workshop time.  
  I conduct in-class mini-conferences during drafting.  
  Students sign up for longer conferencing for full drafts. | I create assignment-specific rubrics with sections for feedback in each category.  
  I create audio feedback to preserve teacher presence during this vital part of writing. |

Redesign for online teaching reflects how I preserved the best of face-to-face writing lessons.
The talent zones in Table 1 reflect resources and practices that have shaped my face-to-face teaching successes. These adjustments have worked in my online classes; they are examples and possibilities of what might work in other online ELA classrooms.

WRITING WITH STUDENTS
In *Teaching Adolescent Writers*, Kelly Gallagher suggests that we should think of students as writing apprentices who learn best “by seeing the writing process consistently modeled by the best writer in that classroom—the teacher. . . . They don’t need a teacher who assigns writing; they need a teacher who demonstrates what good writers do” (48; italics in original). I write and complete just about every assignment with my online students, from blogs to discussion boards to drafts and full, final essays. I write with my students not to be prescriptive or directive; instead, I want them to sense my presence as a participant in our online writing community.

CREATING MICRO LESSONS
I think of micro lessons as online iterations of Nancie Atwell’s mini-lessons, a teaching strategy that is a pillar of my face-to-face teaching. Atwell’s mini-lesson framework for teaching was set up for face-to-face teaching, but the strategy of presenting content in focused, short lessons is especially important in online writing instruction. Atwell explains that mini-lessons should be “practical, relevant, accessible, and far-reaching” and should allow students “to discover and act on their intentions” (101).

The challenge became how to reconstruct mini-lessons for online learning. My solution was micro lessons: short videos that present targeted lessons and lead to independent or collaborative practice. The book *Flip Your Classroom: Reach Every Student in Every Class Every Day* by Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams was my initial inspiration for creating video micro lessons. Although I do not have the expertise to create complex videos, I can use animations, images, and pictures in five-minute videos to communicate presence to my students. My students tell me that viewing these micro lessons makes them feel that they are in our classroom.

USING MENTOR TEXTS
In *The Writing Thief: Using Mentor Texts to Teach the Craft of Writing*, Ruth Culham describes how mentor texts support writing growth: “Learning to use reading to teach writing means looking at readily available texts differently—like a writing thief. . . . A deep, thoughtful understanding of how text works . . . provides options for [students] as they write” (31–32). For basic writing units, such as the school memoir unit, I use a variety of mentor texts including essays by professional writers, essays written by former students, excerpts from novels I’m reading, or short personal articles from *The New York Times*. I think of a mentor text as writing that illustrates a key rhetorical, linguistic, cultural, or general writing possibility. By looking at mentor texts, student writers can be empowered to try strategies they may not have thought of on their own (Dorfman and Cappelli 6).

PROVIDING FEEDBACK
I discovered early on in the online shift that without the embodied presence of teachers and students, feedback can be either hollow or unintentionally hypercritical. For online teaching, I keep the best of feedback but add some needed redesign. I follow Maya Wilson’s feedback lead in her assertion that “assessment becomes an inquiry into the aspects of human experience that only stories can illuminate: settings, characters, relationships, actions, reactions, consequences, conflicts, and resolutions” (45). Thus, in my online feedback, I provide much more detailed commentary, since there is no opportunity for face-to-face follow-up. I design assignment-specific rubrics and include detailed feedback for each evaluation category as well as a holistic comment. Recently, I began
using short audio feedback to preserve a sense of teacher presence for my student writers. Overall, I spend a lot more time on feedback in online teaching.

**THE SCHOOL MEMOIR UNIT ONLINE**

With my talent zones defined, I redesigned the school memoir unit. I use the term *memoir* because it allows my student writers to position themselves in the world of real writers; like the authors of published memoirs, they too have their truths to tell. In my dual-enrollment classes, the school memoir enables high school writers to celebrate school experiences as platforms for narrative and reflective writing. They have opportunities to use cultural, narrative, and rhetorical strategies to forge connectivity with readers, what Kenneth Burke calls *consubstantiation* (20–21). I introduce the term to invite students into the discourse of writers and reinforce the importance of audience.

One aspect of my teaching that has not changed in the move to online instruction is the school memoir prompt. I have kept it simple, devised so that all learners can find truths to share from pivotal moments in their education journeys:

Write a memoir in which you narrate a significant event or experience that took place in a learning space like a classroom, a library, a gym, a music room, a stage, the cafeteria, or a sports field. It can be from any point in your educational journey, even all the way back to kindergarten. Close by reflecting on what makes this experience stand out in your educational journey.

Using my talent zones, I redesigned the school memoir unit for online teaching. Table 2 presents some of the highlights of the online version of this unit.

I kept this first iteration of my school memoir unit as simple as possible. While I wanted to keep the unit within a two-week period, I extended some of the work periods to make sure my student writers had plenty of processing and writing time.

In their memoir essays, students shared authentic, powerful stories of learning, change, and resilience. Vivianne, an eleventh grader, wrote about struggling to play “Cielito Lindo,” a classic mariachi piece, on her violin. Her school memoir focused on how she rose above her teacher’s brutal criticism to master the notes of the song. An excerpt from the final version of her school memoir shows how the teacher’s criticism crushed her musician’s spirit:

“1, 2, 3.” We began playing and all was going well, surprisingly. Then when we arrived to measure 25, it all went downhill. My note was out of tune and I did not hold the note for the correct number of beats. . . . [The teacher] stopped us from playing and looked at me with . . . cold and infuriated eyes and said in an angry tone, “Vivianne, this is a very simple song. How can you not play that correctly?” I felt sick to my stomach and my cheeks turned red. “You know what, just put your instrument away and go home,” [the teacher] demanded as she pointed her bony finger to the door. My heart sank. My eyes filled with tears.

Vivianne’s essay describes her persistence in practice that eventually led to success in learning the piece.

Vivianne’s closing lines gave me goosebumps because of their stark elegance and rhetorical perfection as she appropriated lyrics to share her truth. She ended her essay with these lines:

I began to play and immediately noticed [the teacher’s] and my peers’ face of shock as I played the song with ease. My heart rejoiced and I let out a huge sigh of relief.

And as the song “Cielito Lindo” says, “Canta y no llores,” I did.

Vivianne’s class was the first one in which I asked the writers to include a self-assessment with their points of pride. I wanted to learn how the workshop activities had helped them shape their writing into something they were proud of. Vivianne’s points of pride show her awareness of how creating a story means finding a truth to share:

Well, it has been quite a journey writing this essay, but I am very satisfied with my work. I would say the title of my essay and the concluding line are my favorite parts of my essay. They are both mentioning a lyric from the song “Cielito Lindo” but also really represent what I was feeling in the moment. I am also very satisfied with the way I used very vivid language throughout my essay. Overall, I had fun doing my essay. I felt a huge sense of nostalgia as I was writing out these events that happened my 6th grade year.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Span</th>
<th>Online Learning Activity</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>What Students Do Online</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–3 days</td>
<td>Students view a short video introducing the memoir genre. I created the video relying on quotes from writers who have written about memoir. Additionally, I illustrate and explain memoir qualities using passages from the mentor essays we will read.</td>
<td>Students will recognize the defining traits of a memoir.</td>
<td>Students submit a one- to three-sentence exit slip about their takeaways from the video. I use a discussion board for the exit slip, but it can be done in a variety of other platforms such as Flipgrid or class blogs or even an image of the short response written on an index card.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1–2 days</td>
<td>We read three mentor texts: “The Jacket” by Gary Soto, “Eleven” by Sandra Cisneros, and “What’s So Funny, Mr. Scieszka?” by Jon Scieszka. These mentor texts are tightly focused on specific school-space experiences.</td>
<td>Students will identify audience-based narrative strategies that allow readers to connect with writers’ experiences.</td>
<td>Students share golden lines from at least two essays. These are lines that stand out for them as truths the authors are sharing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 day</td>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Students will complete preliminary planning for their school memoir essay.</td>
<td>Students jot down 5Ws + a takeaway for their memoir topic. If possible, they embed a photo of an object that symbolizes the experience they will write about. They can fill out their 5Ws online, or they can do a handwritten version and upload an image of their page.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1–2 days</td>
<td>Level 1 draft. I use the term Level 1 to describe a very early version of a piece, perhaps even just a paragraph to help writers “jump” into the writing without stress.</td>
<td>Students craft the first version of the school memoir essay for instructor feedback.</td>
<td>Students submit about 250 words of their school memoir to get preliminary “am i on the right track” feedback. Feedback focuses on how they launch the story and their use of effective narrative strategies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1–2 days</td>
<td>Level 2 draft. A full draft of 400 to 500 words.</td>
<td>Students apply instructor feedback in creating a full draft of the memoir.</td>
<td>Students submit a full first draft of the school memoir. Using a memoir-specific rubric, which I have created, I provide formative feedback for one more revision.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1–2 days</td>
<td>Peer Feedback: I make the peer reading assignments to ensure that all essays are read by at least two classmates. They have simple, targeted peer reading tasks, which they can complete in writing or as a one-minute video or audio file.</td>
<td>Students provide peer feedback focused on connectivity created through effective use of narrative strategies.</td>
<td>Students post their drafts in a user-friendly platform. I use our discussion board platform, but Google applications or even Flipgrid work as well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–2 days</td>
<td>Final, revised school memoir is completed.</td>
<td>Applying peer and instructor feedback, students complete a polished, final version of the school memoir.</td>
<td>Students submit the polished draft, including a self-assessment that identifies one or more points of pride in their writing accomplishment.</td>
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Student-centered adjustments are necessary to teach the school memoir unit in an online setting.
As much as I would have preferred to have been in a face-to-face class, the school memoir online launch went well. We did a lot of online discussion as I planned, we learned important lessons about the power of memoir, we found narrative strategies to “steal” from the mentor essays (Culham 2), and we finished with an impressive variety of school memoirs. One student wrote about procrastinating on a science project, another about creating a complex art project in middle school, several about competitive running or swimming, one about solving the Rubik’s cube. As the unit came to a close, I felt pride in myself and in my students over what we accomplished in this new venture into online writing.

**WHAT WE’VE LOST . . . WHAT I MISS**

Despite what feels like online teaching success, I fear I have lost a lot more than what I have gained in the shift to online learning. The biggest gain for me, as a teacher of writing, is seeing silent, non-participatory students blossom into full members of our online class community. Many of the second language speakers of English in my face-to-face classes are reticent about offering comments during class discussions. They are quiet, not because they do not have anything to say, but because they have difficulties in fully expressing themselves in English.

Speaking in class can be stressful for students who do not have full confidence in their mastery of the English language. Online, these quiet students participate vigorously, adding to discussion boards and blogs and sending me emails when they have questions. While online learning is not anonymous, many English as a Second Language (ESL) students lose their language inhibitions when the performative aspects of face-to-face classes are diminished in online learning.

Additionally, online, our class time extends far beyond the time and space of a face-to-face class period. I have been online at 2:00 a.m. when I get an email from a student, and we have an email chat in the middle of the night. Similarly, when students need just-in-time help on an assignment almost any time of the day, it is good to be available to guide them and sometimes calm them when online learning issues occur. Extending the time for connectivity is a definite advantage of online teaching.

Juxtaposed with the positive aspects of online teaching are the undeniable drawbacks. Not being able to be in the learning spaces of our classes is a huge downside of online teaching. My classroom space was a vibrant space for learning, defined by conversation, interaction, fun, inquiry, on-the-spot revision of the lesson, and the immediacy of teacher-student connections.

Possibly one of the biggest losses in the shift to online learning is that we may feel that learning is not happening. Online learning seems disembodied. We may see our students’ faces in tiny squares on our screen, but we miss the body language that reflects understanding or disagreement or puzzlement. In a recent letter to the editor of *The New York Times*, Miles Rideout, a high school sophomore, offered a minute-by-minute parody of what happens in online learning: the last-minute bounding out of bed, the annoying glitches on Zoom, the lack of control over the home learning space, the disorienting display of everyone’s faces in tiny boxes on the screen. Overall, Rideout mourned the normalcy and familiarity of the classroom learning space. He did not mention missing his teachers; he focused on the space lost when we move from real classrooms to screen-based teaching and learning.

If online learning becomes an established part of secondary-level school teaching and our dual-credit environments, the real space of our classrooms, where we see learning happening and we interact responsively with learners, will be gone. This is one of the biggest losses. It may be impossible to shape an equivalent online space, but we *can* create good teaching and support strong learning online for our students.
FROM UNCERTAINTY TO CONFIDENCE

When the shift to online learning happened, I thought many lessons just would not work in online settings. Focusing on my talent zones, I have now taught a film analysis unit, a research unit, and multimodal project unit, all online. The success of the school memoir unit engendered confidence that carried over into other reconstructions of teaching and learning in the online environment. In my talent zones, I have found supports for sustaining community, interaction, resilience, and growth as I guide students to find and share their truths.

Things are askew: we do not know for how long. As teachers, online or onsite, we are tethers for our students. In all teaching spaces, we shape the coherence of their learning. We coach our students to discover stories they can write and share. We cheer student writers through writer’s block, through missteps, through revisions, and through finished writing. Can we do all this online? Maybe not as well or in the same approaches from our classrooms. We are learning new ways to teach writing and reading, new ways to share stories, new ways to empower our student writers to tell their truths. And so we persist through the struggle. Yes, we can do this! ¡Sí, se puede! ☝️

WORKS CITED