February 2024

Embedded Support in the College Writing Classroom: A Teaching Reflection on Late Pandemic Pedagogy for TRIO Students in an Intensive Transitional Summer Course

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Abstract

In this teaching reflection, the authors discuss their experiences as professor and embedded support for an intensive summer college writing course for incoming undergraduates participating in a TRIO program. The reflection considers the contextual factors making this cohort of students vulnerable, including the relationship between family income level and pandemic-era learning loss. The authors devised a pedagogy to "flip" the classroom, allowing students to write deeply during long class sessions, and delivered intensive, layered support at the point of writing to accelerate progress through challenges in writing development.

Keywords

writing pedagogy, pandemic, college transitions, equity, access, higher education

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic wrought global havoc on education across all levels on a scale never before experienced, affecting more than 1.5 billion students across 200 nations (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Many students reported dissatisfaction with lack of social interaction in distance learning, even as a plurality of students found that online learning was the best option during the most severe period of the pandemic (Mawee et al., 2021). However, the abrupt switch to online learning resulted in a loss of school support services that disproportionately affected vulnerable students (McFayden et al., 2020), and the pandemic's overall impact on education renewed concerns over the stratification of educational effectiveness by socioeconomic class (Bailey et al., 2021). Indeed, a recent study found that the duration of distance learning was an important factor in learning loss throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and that rates of poverty corresponded to duration of distance education and therefore learning loss (Goldhaber et al., 2022).

This teaching reflection is situated in what we refer to in this article as the "late pandemic" in the United States. The term "late pandemic" has no singular definition, but appears, in scholarship and throughout the Internet generally, to cohere around the stages in the pandemic when vaccines became widely available and public life began to resume with increasing amounts of normalcy. This also tends to be the period where fully in-person (if masked) instruction resumed in schools throughout the United States and corresponds with the assessment of the impact of pandemic-era teaching and learning on students.

This reflection focuses on a summer intensive, first year writing course for incoming college students with low writing placement scores who are part of a TRIO (not an acronym) program at Central Connecticut State University. The course adapted existing approaches to embedded writing support, alongside Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as an organizing framework, to understand and respond to the needs of students emerging into college following two years of pandemic-era schooling. The intensive format of the course, the "flipped" configuration, and the in-class deployment of a trained, embedded writing tutor in class were important elements which helped the authors of this reflection (the professor and embedded tutor for the course under discussion) assist with the development of the student's writing abilities in unique ways.

In what follows, we first provide additional context for the writing class: descriptions of TRIO, both nationally and institutionally, and the students served by TRIO programs; a description of the fundamentals writing course taken by the students, and the pedagogy for the course. Then we describe the main themes we noted upon reflection and consider these powerful benefits in the context of late pandemic in-person writing pedagogy.

Identity and Background of TRIO Students

Funded through the United States Department of Education, TRIO operates eight different kinds of programs "designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds" (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2022). Such backgrounds include "low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities," and programs are designed to help individuals "progress through the academic pipeline from middle

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school to post baccalaureate programs" (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2022). TRIO grants are competitively awarded and include a division of Student Support Services (SSS), which supports higher educational institutions in providing "opportunities for academic development, assist[ing] students with basic college requirements, and [...] motivat[ing] students toward the successful completion of their postsecondary education" (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2022). Importantly, institutions which receive SSS grants must provide academic tutoring, which can include support in writing as needed by course or program. Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) was the recipient of two SSS grants: a traditional SSS grant, and a SSS grant focused specifically on students who want to become K-12 teachers.

This teaching reflection focuses on a course called "Fundamentals of Composition," which serves CCSU students with low writing placement scores. The course serves as an introduction to college level writing, focusing on academic genres, approaches to argument, and the development of student writing processes. In this particular course, students read about the issue of free college tuition in the United States. They wrote several short essays which assumed different argumentative approaches: position paper, counterargument, rebuttal, and reaffirmation. At the end of the course, they combined these short essays into a single, long essay which included a revised introduction and conclusion, and transitions between major sections. The course was held four days per week over four weeks in July 2022. Each class session was 2.5 hours in length.

Adaptable Pedagogy for a Dynamic Classroom

In considering contextual concerns leading up to the start of the class, the authors asked: what should instructors and embedded supports do to identify and respond to the needs of students in the challenging circumstance of an accelerated course for students with low placement scores in the later stages of the pandemic? The answer, at least for this specific situation, was to adapt existing approaches and frameworks in novel ways, and therefore to bring intensive, layered support to the students as they were writing, for this is where conceptual bottlenecks (such as a student suspending their writing process, and/or struggling to understand new concepts or approaches to writing) would manifest and could be met in real time, with support fashioned for each student and situation. To achieve this, we used the long class periods, and the resulting intensive engagement with assignments, to "flip" the classroom, which gave students time to write deeply on graded assignments during the class period. "Flipping the classroom" is a relatively recent pedagogical innovation that involves doing work in class that is typically considered work to be done outside class (Engin & Donanci, 2014). In a writing class, this would mean using class time to work on the graded writing assignments as the instructor engages students directly or through small groups. This pedagogy not only allows the instructor to calibrate instruction for each student but can make it possible in the "late pandemic" moment to better understand the learning needs of the students in the classroom.

This strategy allowed the authors to engage existing pedagogical approaches in novel ways appropriate for the circumstances. In the first approach, the authors understood that it would be difficult to fully anticipate student needs under these late pandemic circumstances; as such, we employed a familiar concept, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, as a guiding heuristic to make visible student writing capabilities. Given the challenges we assumed these

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students were confronting, the authors viewed it as particularly important to observe the students' writing process in class, and then intervene in "those [writing] processes [...] currently in a state of formation, that are just beginning to mature and develop" (Vygotsky 1978, p. 87). This allowed for attentive, intensive assessment and feedback appropriate for the developmental level of each student writer, which we assumed had been affected during the pandemic. We needed to *observe* the nature of the writing challenges. Then, through working with them on challenges related to conceptual knowledge, academic genres, and writing process, the authors helped the students devise cognitive strategies calibrated to their capabilities.

In the second approach, the authors adapted approaches first developed in Writing Fellows (WF) initiatives, which grew out of the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement which appeared in U.S. universities in the late 1960's and early 1970's (Bazerman et al. 2005, p. 27). A Writing Fellows initiative embeds peer writing support across the disciplines in a diverse array of configurations, fashioned to the specific needs and constraints of a particular institution. The broad goals of WF initiatives are to "help students improve their writing while also assisting faculty in teaching effectively with writing" (Zawacki et al. 2008, p. 1). One of the authors of this reflection was the embedded support for this course; his role, which is a focus in this reflection, was like that of a Writing Fellow and catalyzed many of the course's pedagogical elements. Through "flipping" the course, the instructor and tutor worked within the class time structure to engage deeply with each student, assessing their abilities and needs, then formulating effective cognitive strategies the students learned to use independently.

In the next section, the authors focus on the tutor's role within the classroom as a bridge between instructor and student, how we diagnosed and articulated writing challenges observed in the students, the ways the tutor and instructor interacted with students, and how the tutor intervened in student writing processes to assist in the development of cognitive strategies tailored to each student.

Embedded Tutor's Unique Instructor-Like Role

The embedded tutor was an instructor-like figure who sat in the classroom among the students and engaged with them directly. Through this configuration, students received real-time feedback during their writing process from both the instructor and the tutor, who operated with a high degree of autonomy. Significantly, the embedded tutor was trained by CCSU's Writing Center, and so the tutor already had experience and knowledge of effective strategies when engaging with students, and was skilled at working in one-on-one, small group, and whole classroom configurations. Throughout the course, the students appeared to accept the tutor as both knowledgeable about writing and as a credible, peer-aged mentor. The tutor arrived at this understanding of student perceptions both from his own previous tutoring experiences, but also through the aspects of autonomy he brought to the class as a hybrid figure who operated under the professor's guidance and supervision, yet also was separate from the professor and able to establish his own rapport with students. The tutor was made available to students outside of classroom hours as well, but students utilized the in-class interactions and guidance from the tutor exponentially as the class became more intense.

During class time, the tutor was encouraged to approach students without being prompted by the professor. The tutor opted not just to check in on student progress, but also to get to know

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the students and their writing styles. Each student was approached by the tutor at least once during every class session. In doing this, the tutor aimed to be the bridge between instructor feedback and student learning. This approach forged relationships that were separate from those the students would have with the professor. As a result of these relationships, students became comfortable seeking help from the tutor during all class activities. The presence of an embedded tutor not only assisted the professor with his pedagogy, but also acted independently and brought his own approaches to the classroom. This made the teacher to student ratio 2:7 and provided a more comprehensive learning experience.

Diagnosing Student Writing Challenges

We needed to figure out the writing challenges for each student early in the course; indeed, as there were seven students, we anticipated that there were seven distinct variations of challenges each student was experiencing. Many of the students were able to understand their writing did not sound right and asked for help, as they were not sure and/or could not articulate the problems they understood were present in their writing. Issues would vary between word choice, integration of sources, punctuation, or lack thereof, rambling logic, or another concern depending on the student. Because of this, diagnosis of student efficacy concerns was a pivotal part of both the embedded tutor support and the instructor's role during class time. Among the things being tracked and diagnosed, the authors were looking closely at uptake of genre knowledge, the students' ability to learn new concepts, and the development of student writing processes. Often, a student would request help from the tutor or professor because they felt something didn't sound right in their writing, but they lacked the subject knowledge, or sometimes the vocabulary, to articulate exactly what the problem was. This was typically an example of an uptake in genre knowledge as students were working to close the gap between the writing they were doing and the writing they wanted to be producing. Sometimes this instance would represent the student's ability to learn new concepts, as they are taking in the new information being fed to them by the instructor but struggle with putting them in practice. The student may need those concepts further explained or modeled to resolve their issue. Other times, a student would not ask for help but also would not be writing anything for several minutes. In this case, we surmised that the issue was with the student's writing process. It was then up to the authors to diagnose the issue through reading and then communicate a suitable strategy back to the student. This helped resolve writing bottlenecks for the student and aided in future interactions.

As the tutor became more familiar with each individual student's writing process, he could anticipate where challenges were likely to occur. Some students preferred writing analog in a notebook first, others jumped right into a free write and aimed to revise later, and another student preferred to start with research and begin writing only after they felt sufficient evidence was found. These different styles contributed to different strengths and weaknesses, all of which were observed and discussed by the instructor and tutor. The instructor and tutor would break during class activities to discuss what they had observed in their rounds. This ensured that individual student needs were being communicated and led to either the tutor or instructor following up on those observations to check progress and layer in feedback. Students were also aware of the instructor-tutor conversations because they occurred in the classroom, which pushed

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students to keep working as they knew either the instructor or tutor would be coming around for a follow up on the challenges they were facing.

Student Writing Challenges

As the authors both interacted with the students, they noted that each student encountered different combinations of challenges while writing that manifested in different ways depending on their approach to the assignments. A few students had trouble getting started writing, a writing process concern. However, each needed a different strategy to overcome that challenge based on their preferred styles of learning and writing. One student required a sample sentence, co-written by the tutor and student, to lead them. Afterwards, the student had success keeping momentum and coming up with ideas on their own. Another student had a large amount of evidence but had trouble picking out quotes and felt too intimidated to start writing. This was genre uptake because the student needed to decide how their source could interact with their essay. Another genre uptake challenge appeared when one student had a detailed, personal account that was used as evidence, but it was simply placed on the page without explanation. Other students had no problem getting started but struggled with rhetorical arguments because it was a new concept they were trying to understand. The student felt they had written a satisfactory essay, when they strayed from their topic or did not effectively argue their position. Another student prioritized devaluing the opposing side of their argument rather than proving their own argument. Other students found challenges in the middle of writing, such as not knowing the correct word to use, how to phrase an argument, or clarity of writing, which lead to bottlenecks. These issues were a hybrid of genre uptake and writing process. In some cases, these problems arose from language discrepancies and the tutor sat down with these students to find the correct word or phrase they were trying to communicate. Other times, this was the result of fatigue as the class became more intense and went on for longer. These students would need refocusing and to be given a specific task, like finding a better word in their sentence or a smoother transition from one paragraph to the next, to overcome their fatigue. Conceptual knowledge issues arose as well, particularly with the counterargument assignment. Every student in the class struggled not only with forming such an argument, but also with understanding the value of considering the side opposing their own. The students by the point had grasped the concepts of making an argument but had yet to explore more nuanced ways of strengthening that argument. More class time had to be devoted to this concept so that the students could ease into putting it in practice.

Student Interactions between Instructor and Tutor

The tutor took a specific approach when tutoring the students one-on-one during classroom writing activities. There were two types of ways tutoring would occur, student-initiated and tutor-initiated. In either situation, the tutoring would always start by sitting or kneeling beside the student and getting at eye level, which created a situation where students did not feel they were being evaluated or their work was being looked down on. If the student initiated, the tutor would then ask, "How can I help?" This approach came from the formal training at CCSU's Writing Center which promoted peer-focused sessions; in other words, the student dictates how the

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session goes and what will be worked on. The most common form of help that the students
requested was to review the writing a student produced and provide reassurance that it was
satisfactory. The other form, tutor-initiated, occurred many times in a single class session. The
authors both circled the classroom during writing activities to see what students were working
on. The tutor would always begin these interactions by asking "What are you working on right
now?" This approach was meant to get the tutor and student on the same page in the moment and
eliminate any bottlenecks that may be stopping the student from writing, which was especially
evident if the student hadn't written anything in a while. Some students misunderstood this
interaction during early class sessions, feeling the need to report what they have finished so far.
The tutor assured them he wasn't checking in on them just to make sure they are working but is
there to help them improve what they are writing.

With both the student-initiated interactions and the tutor-initiated interactions, the
students received layered feedback at the point of writing, something much harder to achieve
with only one professor and something they cannot receive while working from home. These
tutor interactions yielded several positive results for the students. First, it lowered the stakes of
assignments given, because all writing could be reviewed by the tutor, and they had ample time
to revise before turning assignments in. Both the instructor and tutor would have a chance to
observe student development without it feeling like an evaluation. This was especially true for
the tutor interactions because the tutor did not assign grades. Because of these interactions,
students were encouraged to ride Vygotsky's line of what students can do with help in the Zone
of Proximal Development. Second, it helped the students view writing as a collaborative process,
rather than a solitary one. Student and tutor are both working together to improve writing, but the
student still submits work they feel is their own. Finally, the placement of an embedded tutor
made the intense classroom configuration more manageable for students. The instructor and tutor
were both intensive in their feedback intervention, serving to both ensure every student's need is
being addressed and model an environment where we are all focused on writing.

Developing Cognitive Strategies

The way the embedded tutor was deployed and utilized varied from student to student, but some
constants remained. When a student did not know how to get started, the tutor engaged in
cognitive strategies to get the student thinking about their work more easily. This would often
take the form of a casual conversation about the topic, whether college education should be made
free for all students. In nearly all cases, the student could discuss the topic casually, but could not
produce it on the page. The tutor would encourage the students to write what they just told him
on their page, and then he would review to see how the language sounded. More often than not,
the statement fit perfectly within the essay, but the student just needed a connecting phrase to
introduce it. If the student struggled with utilizing their sources, the tutor would ask the student
to describe what they read in the evidence they found. The student would then provide a
summary in their own words, paraphrasing the article without realizing it. The tutor would push
them to write that paraphrase in their essay, and the student would resolve their bottleneck
because their sources were no longer wordy and intimidating. Regarding the student that used a
personal account as evidence, the tutor pushed them to focus more on that personal story and
integrate it better into their argument, because it was a strong bit of evidence being underutilized.

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The instructor intervened as well, such as with the student that was devaluing their opposers rather than proving their own claim. The instructor explained to the student that their argument is being done a disservice in this approach, and the student should use their writing talents to strengthen their own side rather than attack the character of those against them with an ad hominem argument.

As the tutor intervened more frequently, he began to anticipate the problems a student would have. One of the most effective tactics utilized was engaging in a playback of information with students. This took the form of reading what the student had written and then relaying the information back to see if the tutor and student agreed on what the student had written. If there was a discrepancy, the student understood their argument mentally but could not translate it to the page, and the tutor would need to bridge that gap. This could be achieved by listening to the student describe what they meant in their own words and helping them find the correct wording to integrate it into their essay. This showed the students were in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, as they could argue their claim completely on their own. However, they needed help to translate that argument into writing. The tutor needed to ride that line between what a student can do on their own and what a student can do with help to properly assist these writing challenges.

Other challenges required different methods of intervention that were tailored to the individual student's needs. Some students could not get started and needed a casual conversation about the topic or even a co-written sample sentence at first, but then they could move on from there. Other students would do the opposite and overwrite, straying too far from the topic, thus they would need refocusing and help deciding what to cut. A few students wanted the tutor to write for them and would ask him what they should say and attempt to copy his response word for word. The tutor would set a boundary in this moment, pushing the students to produce their own work in their own words and demonstrating the value of that by showing how the essay flows much more nicely when it's in one coherent tone. In all cases, the students would be left with a specific task when the tutor left them, such as finishing a paragraph or finding better ways to use sources. This gave them something to show and discuss with the instructor when he came around, increasing the benefit of layered feedback for them.

<u>Writing Outcomes</u>

The personalized approach, fashioned to the needs of each student, produced many positive outcomes. A particularly prominent gain was the students' uptake of academic genre knowledge. Early in the class, the authors had instructed the students on the different types of sentences used in academic writing, and how they worked together to create the paragraphs in academic genres. As the students worked first on small pieces, then combined these pieces into a longer, final project, they learned how to build paragraphs and create logical coherence throughout an academic essay, and how to fashion these general principles for the assignment and course. This resulted, for example, in stronger use of transitions between essay segments, and more capable paraphrasing. Additionally, each student demonstrated improvement in their ability to value, understand, and fashion nuanced arguments. The students were expected to develop different argumentative stances on the same topic; it was difficult, at first, for the students to understand the value of a counterargument when they were invested in their own positions. Through the

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intensive feedback, students were better able to understand and execute these approaches to argumentation and avoid logical fallacies such as ad hominem attacks. Overall, their self-efficacy improved. Each student had concerns about their writing abilities at the beginning of the course. Given that the embedded support was better able to identify student development levels, and devise cognitive strategies fashioned for each student, each student was able to conclude the class with a stronger belief that they could "do" college-level writing. For their final project, each student produced a deep argument that revealed what they had learned, and what they could "do." Improved self-efficacy, along with tangible gains in genre knowledge, conceptual knowledge, and writing process, resulted in a course that was accessible and equitable for the students.

Conclusion

This teaching reflection is one among what we assume will be many stories emerging about pandemic-era teaching and learning. This reflection connects many kinds of student challenges with new takes to process-based writing pedagogies common in contemporary university writing programs and courses. Such approaches can include generating ideas, planning and drafting, peer review, and using writing to learn and engage with topics and disciplines (Kiefer et al. 2021).

The students discussed here had vulnerabilities linked to social-economic class, possible pandemic-era K-12 learning loss, and low writing placement scores. They also were transitioning into college. The authors of this piece devised a teaching approach that helped tease out some answers to what educators are trying to know: what have our students learned, and what are they capable of doing, as students return to classrooms? What should educators do through their pedagogies to help students? We learned that a time-intensive format, coupled with a strong teacher-student ratio and embedded support, created the conditions for deep learning. The tutor had the latitude to make many decisions about his interactions and strategies, and this helped foment genuine camaraderie between the tutor and most of the students. It was important, however, that the tutor was well trained and highly skilled for this approach to succeed.

As a result, the authors clearly saw the developmental level of each student's academic writing and were able to utilize our pedagogical approach not just to help students succeed in class, but to better equip them with writing strategies moving forward. While we understand that the conditions we encountered are not the same for all, and that our resources might also be unique, we are convinced that embedded support from a mature peer-aged tutor can intensify the learning experience when students are given substantial opportunities to work deeply on writing assignments during class. Challenges can be ascertained, questions and bottlenecks can be resolved, and strategies devised, in real time. In "Fundamentals of Composition," this approach was an accelerant to development that engaged each student at their developmental level, yielding positive results for these vulnerable students emerging into college writing classrooms in the late pandemic.

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