Towards More Humane Technology in the Online and Hybrid College Composition Classroom

Amber Foster, University of Southern California

This paper responds to demand for more empathetic, "kinder" (Denial, 2019) educational technology for the online and hybrid college composition classroom. I point out the gap between scholarship on best practices for technology-mediated writing instruction and the capabilities of extant instructional technologies such as Zoom. I argue that these technologies, even with sound pedagogical practice, can inhibit student engagement and work against efforts to foster empathy and build effective learning communities. By so doing, I call for more "humane" technology that centralizes empathy in the process of creating more inclusive and engaged learning environments.

Introduction: Composition and Human Connection

College composition courses thrive on human connection. For decades, research into the best practices for technology-mediated instruction has pointed to student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction as fundamental to fostering student engagement and building community, particularly within asynchronous courses whose rates of attrition tend to be higher than with in-person, synchronous, or hybrid modalities (Bawa, 2016). In their study of online courses, Joanne Dolan, Kevin Kain, Janet Reilly, and Gaurav Bansal (2017) pointed to the "three presences" required to maintain student engagement: teaching, or teacher-to-student interaction; social, or the "deliberate interaction between individuals with shared interests or goals" (p. 50); and cognitive, or a student's reflective engagement with the course, their peers, and their own learning processes. The authors ultimately advocated for increased emphasis on cognitive presence, acknowledging as they do the difficulty involved in keeping students "present" while online.

The answer to how we go about creating these three presences within online and hybrid courses may lie with "digital empathy" or "concern and caring for others expressed through computer-mediated communications" (Terry & Cain, 2016, p. 1). Emerging scholarship in this field suggests that teaching digital empathy can reap considerable rewards, including improvements to student engagement, active listening, and teamwork, in addition to the more far-reach-

ing cognitive and social benefits of empathy as a life skill (Chen, 2018). Put simply, students need to care on an emotional level to learn—to be invested not only in their own learning, but in the learning of others. Likewise, they need to feel that the instructor is invested in them as human beings, not solely as machines tasked with producing academic content. As Judith V. Jordan and Harriet L. Schwartz (2018) noted, "connection is so essential to our wellbeing and to our very survival that the brain is wired to respond in the same way and in the same place to social exclusion as it does to life-threatening physical pain" (p. 26). Empathy is especially crucial in more "active" learning environments such as college composition classrooms, where the emphasis is on collaboration and discussion (praxis) rather than passive absorption of course content.

Yet we must also acknowledge that "empathy" is a contested term. While usually framed as "putting oneself in another's shoes," the process of empathy-building is complicated by our positions of power within educational and social hierarchies, due to characteristics such as rank, race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, or health. As Michalinos Zembylas (2017) explained, "Empathetic identification with the plight of others . . . is not a sentimental recognition of potential 'sameness'—you are in pain and so am I, so we both suffer the 'same'—but a realization of our own common humanity, while acknowledging asymmetries of suffering, inequality, and injustice" (p. 182). We may not ever be able to fully put ourselves in each other's shoes, but it is through that delicate negotiation between self and other that classroom communities are built. A more useful term might be what Judith V. Jordan and Harriet L. Schwartz (2018) called "radical empathy," a concept that emerged out of the study of relational cultural theory. In that educational model, the learning experience moves away from one-way transmission of knowledge towards two-way "relatedness and responsiveness to one another and the desire to engage in growthful relationships" (p. 26). In contrast with traditional notions of empathy that ask one to understand the other, radical empathy is mutually transformative, requiring "deep learning and acknowledgement of the power of relationship where both people experience growth" (p. 27). Although the authors are primarily focused on the instructor-to-student relationship, other scholars have called for empathetic concern that is culturally responsive (Warren, 2014), a means of furthering ongoing efforts to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion within higher education.

More Technology, More Problems

The challenge, as I see it, is the disconnect between the best practices for online writing instruction, discussed above, and the capabilities of current learning technologies such as Zoom. In fact, this presentation emerged out of my concern over the lack of meaningful interaction I was seeing in my

classes, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. My own experience of disconnect wasn't due to lack of training or support for online instruction. Like many instructors, the pandemic led me to redesign my writing and critical reasoning courses for better implementation in a remote learning environment. I made netiquette policies on my syllabus to encourage active, camera-on participation; I created interactive activities that relied heavily on Zoom breakout rooms and Google Docs; I held individual conferences where I checked in with both students' writing and wellbeing.

All the same, as the pandemic wore on, more and more students became what Galit Wellner (2021) nicknamed "Zoombies"—a word that invokes both "Zoom" and "Zombie," or "a metaphor to indicate a strange behavior of zoomed participants, whose 'digital body' in the form of a Zoom conversation box exists, but is empty and silent" (p. 2). It might be easy to place the blame for this phenomenon on the stressors of the pandemic, but like Wellner and others, I started to question to what extent the technologies I was using were contributing to the problem. I wasn't convinced that either Zoom or Blackboard—my university's go-to instructional technologies—could generate the digital empathy necessary to achieving learning outcomes within my seminar-style composition courses.

My experience is not unique. In a recent article for the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* Beth McMurtrie (2022) surveyed higher education faculty and students, reporting back on widespread "student disconnection." Students aren't showing up or tuning in, a trend she attributes to various factors, including pandemic-induced social anxiety and widespread burnout amongst both faculty and students. She also highlighted the common perception that classroom technologies such as Zoom can heighten feelings of disconnection. She wrote that "some faculty members who responded to *The Chronicle* believe that students' study skills atrophied in the transition to remote learning, especially in high school. Workloads were often lighter. Deadlines became fluid. Discussion happened asynchronously or not at all. Students entered college, they believe, expecting more of the same" (para. 33). This perceived decline in student engagement could be partially attributed to lack of faculty resources such as training and technical support, given how few universities were prepared for a sudden shift online.

The irony of the situation is that the exigencies of the pandemic, not to mention ongoing declines in working conditions for composition teaching faculty (the majority of whom are non-tenure-track or adjuncts already overburdened with teaching and service), leads to maximum burnout at a time when our cognitive and emotional presences are most needed. And, in my experience, instructors are far more likely to blame themselves for the problem of student disconnection, rather than the technologies hastily adapted in a time of crisis.

The Trouble with Tech

The question, therefore, is not only "are we using technologies the right way?" but also "are we using the right technologies?" Many instructors, including myself, lament the difficulties involved in teaching in online or hybrid modalities, despite the supposed benefits of synchronous-over-asynchronous instruction (even assuming unlikely, ideal conditions in which all students have equal access to the requisite technology, a quiet workspace, and high-speed Internet).

A growing body of scholarship points to the limits of what current technologies can do, or what educator Susan D. Blum (2020) referred to as the "human-technology semiotic mismatch" (para. 22). Blum argues that the teacher-centered framework on Zoom does not allow for the ebb and flow of natural conversation, given that only one speaker can talk at one time. She added that "all the communicative signs that embodied humans rely on are thinned, flattened, made more effortful or entirely impossible. Yet we interpret them anyway" (para. 16). We cannot, as sundry anthropological research informs us, accurately "read" social cues (gestures, facial expressions, body language) on video conferencing platforms. Moreover, as John C. Sherblom (2010) pointed out, social cues in synchronous online classes can be misread or exaggerated, leading to discourse that "perpetuate[s] stereotypic impressions and inferences about social status, class, gender, race, and ethnicity" (pp. 500–501). In some cases, as Krystle Phirangee and Alesia Malec (2017) asserted, efforts to build online communities may result in an increase in feelings of social isolation and disconnection in students whose "dominant identity does not fit with the group" (p. 169). In this way, instructional technologies may unintentionally exacerbate existing social biases.

Educational technologies are not neutral tools (Strate, 2012); rather, they are social constructions designed to meet specific social needs. As critical code scholar Ruha Benjamin (2019) pointed out, social biases are built into the code of our technologies, often in ways unintended by their creators. Benjamin calls this "default discrimination," finding that "social and legal codes, like their byte-size counterparts, are not neutral; not are all codes created equal. They reflect particular perspectives and forms of social organization that allow some people to assert themselves—their assumptions, interests, and desires—over others" (p. 77). If we are to address systemic inequalities within technology-mediated instruction, therefore, we must re-examine the technologies we are using and ask ourselves if they are doing what we want them to do; namely, facilitating the empathetic human connections necessary to create inclusive classroom communities.

Moving Forward

The COVID-19 crisis may (hopefully) be coming to a close, but hybrid and online instructional modes are here to stay. In spite of nostalgic calls to return to a fully in-person instructional model, the cat, as they say, is out of the bag; the shift towards technology-mediated instruction in higher education was well underway before the onset of the pandemic, given the fact that online courses are cheaper for universities, more convenient and flexible for students, and less reliant on faculty labor. *Harvard Business Review* writers Sean Gallagher and Jason Palmer (2020) claimed this change is "long overdue," noting that

> After a decade of growth in postsecondary alternatives, including 'massively open online courses' (MOOCs), industry-driven certification programs, and coding bootcamps. This moment is likely to be remembered as a critical turning point between the 'time before,' when analog on-campus degree-focused learning was the default, to the 'time after,' when digital, online, career-focused learning became the fulcrum of competition between institutions (para. 3).

In the neoliberal university, technology-mediated instruction is a win-win—a way of meeting consumer/student demand with supply, thus increasing the "price and value" (para. 2) of higher education.

As dismaying as that perspective might be for those of us more occupied with the business of educating our students than the business of higher education, we cannot ignore the demand for online and hybrid educational models. Although administrators often claim that students desire a return to full in-person models, others view hybrid learning as a means of addressing systemic inequities within higher education. In her analysis of the mixed reactions to the return to in-person instruction, Adrienne Lu (2022) found that

> some students . . . want their colleges to make hybrid learning permanent. They argue that scaling up remote learning during the pandemic made higher education more accessible — not only for students with disabilities and the immunocompromised, but also commuter students, those balancing schoolwork with jobs, and students with caregiving responsibilities — and helped to protect vulnerable faculty members" (para. 7).

It stands to reason that some courses are well suited to online learning, and many instructors and students will welcome the flexibility of being able to work from home at a time when commuter costs, and cost of living, continue to rise.

That said, we must remain alert to institutional shortcuts and cost-saving measures that could negatively impact student engagement and quality of instruction. As history scholar Catherine Denial (2019) asserted, efforts to build "kinder" pedagogy—teaching methods that reimagine the instructor-student relationship as more collaborative and compassionate—are often hampered by financially-driven institutional imperatives. As Denial explained, "To extend kindness means recognizing that our students possess innate humanity, which directly undermines the transactional educational model to which too many of our institutions lean, if not cleave" (para. 18).

Not all hope is lost, however. Educational technology markets are competitive, and many universities, including mine, have begun considering alternatives with more advanced social functions. At the same time, technology providers are responding to growing cultural anxiety over how our technological devices socially engineer our behavior. For example, Tyler Harris, the Google Design Ethicist behind the Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma,* founded The Center for Humane Technology, a group that advocates for designing technologies that resist the attention economy, reduce digital distractions, and privilege user wellbeing, or "time well spent." Although their efforts center on social media, we could apply a similar critical gaze to educational technologies such as Zoom. It's possible that better technologies exist already, or could exist, if developers and educators worked together to design software to better meet the needs of a changing higher education landscape. My own future research will work towards articulating the principles of humane technology, considering how instructional technologies could be created, or adapted, to better foster empathy and human connection within online and hybrid college composition classrooms.

Additionally, while we wait for old learning technologies to evolve and new technologies to emerge, those of us involved in faculty training and mentoring can demonstrate the best practices for fostering student engagement and building community with the technologies we currently have at our disposal. We can continue to get involved in faculty governance and resist administrative pressure to enact cost-saving measures that negatively impact student learning. We can work with administrators to re-evaluate existing learning management systems and consider alternatives that will allow us to teach with digital empathy in mind. In this way, we have the potential to move towards more human-centered educational technologies that will help us resist the dehumanizing forces of the post-pandemic, technology-mediated university.

References

Bawa, Papia. (2016). Retention in online courses: Exploring issues and solutions—A literature review. *SAGE Open, 6*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015621777.

Benjamin, Ruha. (2019). *Race after technology: Abolitionist tools for the New Jim Code*. Polity.

Blum, Susan D. (2020, April 22). Why we're exhausted by Zoom. *Inside Higher Ed.* https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/04/22/professor-explores-why-zoom-classes-deplete-her-energy-opinion.

Chen, Cheryl Wei-yu. (2018). Developing EFL students' digital empathy through video production. *System*, *77*, 50–57. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2018.01.006

Denial, Catherine. (2019, 15 August). A pedagogy of kindness. *Hybrid Pedagogy*. https://hybridpedagogy.org/pedagogy-of-kindness/.

Dolan, Joanne, Kain, Kevin, Reilly, Janet, & Bansal, Gaurav. (2017). How do you build community and foster engagement in online courses? *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, *151*, 45–60. https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20248.

Gallagher, Sean, & Palmer, Jason. (2020, September 29). The pandemic pushed universities online. The change was long overdue. *Harvard Business Review*, https://hbsp.harvard.edu/inspiring-minds/the-pandemic-pushed-universities-online-the-change-was-long-overdue.

Jordan, Judith V., & Schwartz, Harriet L. (2018). Radical empathy in teaching. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, *153*, 25–35. https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20278.

Lu, Adrienne. (2022, 11 April). Some colleges are ending hybrid learning. Students are pushing back. *Chronicle of Higher Education.* https://www.chronicle.com/article/some-colleges-are-ending-hybrid-learning-students-are-pushing-back

McMurtrie, Beth. (2022, 5 April). A 'stunning' level of student disconnection. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-stunning-level-of-student-disconnection

Phirangee, Krystle, & Malec, Alesia. (2017). Othering in online learning: an examination of social presence, identity, and sense of community. *Distance Education*, *38*(2), 160–172. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2017.1322457

Sherblom, John C. (2010). The computer-mediated communication (CMC) classroom: a challenge of medium, presence, interaction, identity, and relationship. *Communication Education,* *59*(4), 497–523. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2010.486440

Strate, Lance. (2012). If it's neutral, it's not technology. *Educational Technology*, *52*(1), 6–9. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44429982

Terry, Christopher, & Cain, Jeff. (2016). The emerging issue of digital empathy. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, *80*(4)58, 1-4. https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe80458.

Warren, Chezare A. (2014). Towards a pedagogy for the application of empathy in culturally diverse classrooms. *Urban Review, 46*(3), 395–419. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-013-0262-5

Wellner, Galit. (2021). The Zoom-bie student and the lecturer: Reflections on teaching and learning with Zoom. *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology*, *25*(1), 153–161. https://doi.org/10.5840/techne2021121132

Zembylas, Michalinos. (2017). In search of critical and strategic pedagogies of compassion: Interrogating pity and sentimentality in higher education. In P. Gibbs (Ed.), *The pedagogy of compassion at the heart of higher education* (pp. 173–187). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-57783-8_12