

Creating Recorded Zoom Video Evaluations for American University Students' Historical Writing following the Covid-19 Pandemic

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The Covid-19 pandemic profoundly affected institutions of higher education globally. In the United States, colleges and universities quickly relied on new technological tools for instruction to facilitate learning at a distance. Zoom constituted one prominent example, through which teachers met with students in real time.

This study reflects on my own practice utilizing Zoom as an instructional tool both during remote instruction beginning in 2020 and when we resumed face-to-face teaching in the fall of 2021. I am a faculty member in the School of Teaching and Learning at the University of Florida (UF) in the United States who teaches courses in the history of education. This is a public, land grant university located in the northern part of the state (Gainesville) and was founded in 1853. UF has become an academically comprehensive institution containing 16 colleges. It is also highly selective in its student admissions; fewer than 32 percent of applicants gain admission. In the fall of 2021, there were 61,112 students enrolled, 41,180 of whom were undergraduates.

After having used Zoom for our class meetings in 2020, I considered the viability of technological tools in teaching history of American education. In particular, I thought of ways that I could be effective in teaching undergraduate and graduate students who typically did not aspire to becoming historians or teachers of history. One perennial teaching challenge has therefore been in evaluating students' historical understanding (Wineburg, 1999). Our course objectives are for students to demonstrate their understanding of how and why American education has changed over time and the ways in which schools and society have impacted each

other. Written assignments ask students to utilize assigned books, journal articles, primary sources, and class lectures as resources in answering an essay prompt. They are expected to respond to a question by posing and developing a historical argument. One example of an essay question given to students included the following: “Why did Progressive educational reformers seek to expand the influence of schooling in the lives of American youth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the modern k-12 school system? In your response, include evidence from John Rury’s text, John Dewey’s “My Pedagogic Creed,” our class presentations, and our in-class primary source documents from Ellwood Cubberley and Sara O’Brien.” Most students in these classes have relatively little experience with this sort of academic task.

My challenge became how to provide feedback to students that was both explicit and useful. For many years, I had utilized the format of a written memorandum to each student about their paper indicating the relative strengths and weaknesses of their work. In the fall 2022 semester, I began to experiment with a new method: a personalized 5-minute video recording through Zoom of myself to each student. Zoom also produces a written transcript of my remarks to reinforce the messages contained in the video. My first aim was to provide explicit feedback in communicating clearly the strengths and areas of improvement of each student’s essay. My second aim was to provide useful feedback in giving students tangible ways of applying specific points of evaluation to their next writing assignment. In each video, I addressed the student individually by name and with specific references to their written work. I attempted to demonstrate my earnest engagement with the ideas that each student had proposed in their essay. I identified specific points of strength and how their ideas had impacted my own thinking about the historical problem. I also identified areas in need of improvement and how the student could envision a response that was more thorough and persuasive (DiYanni & Borst, 2020; Germano & Nicholls, 2020).

The video format for evaluating students' work had multiple benefits. It provided a personal message to the individual student. It also demonstrated my sincere interest in each student's historical interpretation, ideas, and argument. I took care to situate my constructive criticism within a frame of encouragement and belief that the student can think and write historically. I also conveyed that the student could improve by diligently applying my feedback to the next writing assignment. Finally, I invited each student to respond with questions to me if any of my evaluation was unclear.

How, then, could I learn the extent to which this mode of evaluation was effective? At the end of the fall 2022 semester, I administered anonymous surveys to both the undergraduate and graduate students in my history of education courses. This survey contained the following questions. Did you find the video feedback and transcript on your paper assignments to be clear and comprehensible? Why or why not? To what extent was the video and transcript format effective in helping you to apply suggestions for improvement in future assignments? Overall, what do you think are some of the benefits of having this kind of feedback on your writing assignments? Overall, what do you think are some of the limitations of having this kind of feedback on your writing assignments?

Students' responses to these surveys suggested that there were a number of benefits to my utilization of video feedback to their writing. "I felt like I was having a conversation with Professor Terzian," one graduate student wrote. Another graduate student conveyed that "I think it provides a human element to the feedback that can be sort of encouraging." One undergraduate student suggested that "It's more engaging than merely a score and short comments. I feel as though it was more in-depth this way." And another undergraduate student communicated that they gained encouragement as well: "I got more optimism, and I saw the positive parts of my

essay.” Finally, one undergraduate student suggested that the video format allowed for criticism to be presented in a way that allayed students’ apprehensions. “It was beneficial to hear your tone of voice when giving feedback,” the student wrote. “As a student, usually criticisms on essays are nerve-wracking and we can begin to think that our professors are disappointed or upset at us. But the video eliminates that fear” (Dirkx 2008).

This is not to suggest that the utilization of video evaluations was without shortcomings. For example, both an undergraduate and graduate student responded that “It’s a little intimidating hearing someone verbally give you feedback.” Another undergraduate student sought more corrections in the text of their essay, “instead of just listening to what I did wrong.” In a similar vein, another undergraduate student had the impression that “there were fewer details about the essay than in written feedback.” And another graduate student expressed a degree of ambivalence about whether the feedback was useful in their development of historical thinking and writing. “Though it helped most of the time,” the student wrote, “I still think if there can be notes directly on my paper as feedback it would be even more helpful. Most of the time, I knew my problems, but was confused on how to improve.”

These responses from both undergraduate and graduate students in my fall 2022 history of education courses at the University of Florida lead me to a number of conclusions. First, the use of personalized video feedback has the potential to direct individual attention to each student’s written work. It also has the potential to convey constructive criticisms through an encouraging message and tone of voice (Bain 2004; Dirkx 2008). Furthermore, the written transcript accompanying the video can reinforce the spoken and visual message. Limitations of this mode of evaluating students’ written historical work include that some students simply prefer to receive written responses on their paper itself for specific corrections. And finally, there is the

challenge facing me as the instructor of these courses. Creating a personalized video for each student, editing a written transcript, and providing handwritten corrections and comments on each paper could be too time consuming to be realistic or sustainable. Nonetheless, technological tools for instruction such as Zoom continue to develop and proliferate, it is incumbent on all higher education instructors to consider their power, utility, and academic promise.

References:

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