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Student Perspectives on Returning to In-Person Learning Modalities
Lance K. Tulloch

Abstract

Following the pandemic-induced shift in educational modalities from in-person to online, the calls for a return to “normalcy” or in-person learning guided institutional policy making and culture more broadly. This study is an initial step towards tracking and interrogating this shift and the artefacts brought into view at Western Washington University. A quantitative survey and two rounds of qualitative focus groups and interviews were performed in order to assess student perspectives on this transition or "return" to in-person learning. The resulting code, FIRBO, calls attention to Folk Knowledge, Interaction, Resources, Barriers, and Openness. These themes highlight and interact with a pervasive sense of academic-institutional nostalgia which underscores the student response to the transition. This nostalgia invokes pre-pandemic and pandemic era features to envision a higher education which is characteristic of the times before the pandemic while also integrating the accessibility of the hybrid and online classroom. In addition to this centralized academic-institutional nostalgia, dilemmas were located which center on Economic Logics, Cheating, Rest and Accessibility, as well as Unknown and Known Unknowns.

Keywords: Learning Modalities, Academic-Institutional Nostalgia, Accessibility, Folk Knowledge, Educational Barriers, Cheating, Higher Education, COVID-19.
Introduction

This project positions itself as a first step towards mapping post-pandemic perceptions and experiences in higher education; asking: how are students at WWU experiencing the shift from online modalities to in-person learning? Qualitative fieldwork informed by an initial quantitative survey was utilized to assess how students at Western Washington University were perceiving this shift or return.

In a 2022 opinion piece from the New York Times, Jonathan Malesic argues that the stakeholders of higher education must “insist on in-person classes and high expectations for fall 2022 and beyond” (Malesic 2022). This call to action reflects broader opinions following the period of pandemic-induced lockdowns and online classes. These opinions stretched from primary education to higher ed and were propelled by a public aching to go back to “the way it was before.” This devastating sense of nostalgia or longing for normalcy is the backdrop through which COVID responses developed. Although the lockdowns created pressure, which Malesic cites as contributing to the worsening of educational performance, the transition also provided opportunities from which new realities of higher education could be constructed.

Nostalgia is central to the social happenings that shaped educational policy and decision making during the pandemic; the goal from the start was to “return to normal.” The particular nostalgia permeating throughout student perceptions of higher education is both singular and

Figure 1. Academic-Institutional Nostalgia
twofold in its nature. There is nostalgia for the times before the lockdowns and online modalities becoming the standard and a nostalgia for the access and features which the online modalities bring to higher education. At first there was the nostalgia for the “before times,” a term my advisor has aptly taken to using, followed by the transition or return to in-person modalities which attempt to bring this past back into a sense of presentness. This new present features a nostalgia for what was, both in terms of the “before times” and in terms of the online period.

Naming this particular nostalgia was a troubling process given the specificity of the term. Drawing from Rosaldo (1989), Imperial Nostalgia is described as when “someone deliberately alters a form of life, and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to the intervention” (70). However, Imperial Nostalgia is not specific to the academic institutions which are the center of this project. As such Academic-Institutional Nostalgia is related to broader social nostalgia, or desires to create a future which is the past, characteristic of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is rooted in the particular localities of the academic system. It relates particularly to the way in which actors within education perceived a return to the way things were before the pandemic as a necessity. Then, after transitioning out of the pandemic-induced online period, it altered to include a distinct nostalgia for the opportunities lost by this secondary transition which it at first evoked.

Positionality

In order to create an accounting for the implicit biases I bring into this work, I have included this positionality to highlight the stances and contexts which I inhabit. I bring with me a background as a lower middle-class student, my education at Western has been funded by student loans and Federal and State grants. Further, I am a graduate of a community college transferring into Western with an Associates in Anthropology. This has affected the ways in which I perceive
myself in relation to the university having entered the university about halfway done with my degree. In both of these cases, I fall outside of the construction that is the “traditional student.” This lends itself to particular biases, in my own case a certain disillusionment or more aptly demythologized view of higher ed, which in the case of this study has been quite useful. Particularly for critically analyzing what is occurring in student perceptions.

Additional bias can be located in my background as a white queer and habitual man. My experiences within classrooms are informed by the presence of patriarchy and white supremacy within the educational system. As a white male-passing individual, my experiences within education have been formed in a system wherein the cultural values of my appearance and heritage grant me affordances in both access and image/presentation.

I was/am also a student going through these transitions. I was in community college and began my time at Western during the COVID lockdowns and the gradual return. The population for this study is a demographic which I belong to. I have, in my own experiences, felt the shifts caused by the pandemic and the eventual return to what we continue to call “normalcy,” even if it is anything but normal. This is a primary concern for bias in the study. However, through the rigor of the research, my opinions have been sidelined, to focus firmly on what has emerged from the data.

Furthermore, this project in and of itself is facilitated by my role as an “Honors student” at Western, which carries with it a baggage of exclusivity and an allowance of space which may not be characteristic of other experiences at WWU. This bias in particular has been interesting to navigate, because for many students, the description of classes is counter to the experiences garnered through taking classes offered by the Honors College. I will not claim that the Honors College is the only organization breaking the mold with classroom experiences, but the space,
course sizes, and focus on interdisciplinarity center a kind of experimentation and interactivity that may not be standard in larger, introductory courses.

Methods

The qualitative approach of this study utilized a quantitative survey to inform a qualitative inquiry involving interviews and focus groups. The quantitative survey reached a sample of 285 participants at Western and provided a “snapshot” of the general undergraduate perspectives on Western’s campus; a data set which would be fundamental to the development of qualitative questioning. These responses did not undergo statistical testing, as this data was used solely for formulating further lines of inquiry. The qualitative portion of this study consisted of 3 focus groups and two interviews which were performed in the spring and fall quarters of 2023. Participants were gathered via advertising on social media and across the campus through fliers. The data collected from these sessions underwent transcription and thematic analysis.

Taking the quantitative data and developing qualitative inquiries served to transfigure the findings of the survey. Transitioning from looking at the general features to the specific features. This specificity is the advantage of qualitative research, as, while not allowing for generalization across large loosely related populations, it brings attention to the workings of the communities we inhabit informed by broader social happenings and structures. This approach is invaluable for its ability to bring attention to these mediations, as culture and its structures reach through communal meaning making and vests itself in the decision-making processes of individuals (Geertz 1973, 315; Bourdieu 1977, 72). The way to document these processes, invisible and constructed as they often are, is described by Geertz (1973) as “thick description” and is an interpretive approach; meaning that following data collection the analysis cannot be thin, simply what is happening, but
instead needs to explore the what, the why, the how of the gesture as well the transmission of these gestures and even further how these gestures, or symbols, are being interpreted (312). This is quite a tall order and lends this type of research its rigor.

Specifying this Ethnographic approach to the type of research done here requires a site to be located. Geertz’s examples of sheep theft and winking in his article thick description are analyses of phenomena. Ethnographic interpretations and analyses of phenomena, particularly in the cases posited by Geertz, rely on discourse. Through discourse ethnography can clue into how social actions are being performed and the contexts within which they are being performed. Hornberger (1987) attributes this analysis of discourse as “not only worthy of investigation in its own right, but as an embodiment of the essence of culture and as constitutive of what the language-culture-society relationship is all about” (297). Through discourse, we can see the mediations of environmental factors or contexts on individuals, which Bourdieu (1977, 72) termed habitus, and the cultures they constitute. This reflexive feedback loop, which should not be confused as tautological, is the process by which we are created/modified by our environments/contexts and how these environments/contexts create and modify us.

It should also be noted, in order to maintain the confidentiality of participants, names have been substituted and participants were allowed to choose aliases which will be utilized in the qualitative section. Interview participants are referred to as Interlocutors.
Quantitative

During the spring of 2023, I circulated a survey intended for the undergraduate student population at WWU. It focused on locating general sites or themes through which the transition to in-person learning could become visible. The results of these questions, which I have referred to as a “snapshot” of the campus, are the foundation on which the qualitative phase of this study was formulated.

The survey reached undergraduate students across academic levels covering a broad range of experiences relating to the online period of education. This spread provides space for a diversity of experiences within the sample as students will have had some experiences with online learning by the time the survey was given out. Experiences which would include online college and high school, either exclusively or a mixture. Additionally, it was the case that many people stopped attending university during the pandemic, creating a break period through which the transitions could be perceived and observed. These experiences, while mixed, all coalesce as the transition or return to in-person learning takes place,
shaping how students understand and remember the period which they are moving away from. The demographics collected by this survey were fairly limited, focusing on academic interests, such as the students major or program, academic year, and enrollment status.

Finances were explored as a potential area of interest or stress in the transition. Participants were given a variety of options to categorize their employment status, the results of which are highlighted in Figure 3. In addition to this categorization, the participants were asked if the transition had affected their financial situations. Interestingly, 52% of the sample said there were no affects or alterations, which 33% or 95 participants said that the transition had affected them. The remainder were undecided and selected maybe. This was quite surprising as the majority of participants were unaffected by the transition back to in-person, unlike the transition to online learning during the pandemic-induced lockdowns. Because of these findings, finances were not explored as heavily in the qualitative phase of the study.

Figure 3. Work Status.

Figure 4. Alterations to Financial Situation
Notions of satisfaction are a point of interest in course evaluations at Western. Linking the language of these evaluations with the language of the survey created an opportunity to first rate student perceptions of online and in-person modalities as well as instructor accessibility in these modalities. Then to interrogate what satisfaction means and looks like. Figure 5 highlights participants’ satisfaction with online and in-person learning. Surprisingly, both modalities had fairly positive reviews with in-person being heavily skewed towards satisfactory perceptions and online having a far more balanced distribution, with miniscule skew (of around 9 participants) towards satisfactory perceptions. The responses were quite similar in figure 6, in which participants ranked their perceptions of instructor access with the two modalities. Both modalities have a skew towards satisfactory perceptions, though in-person is once more displaying a more extreme skew. These responses are quite interesting as they point towards a general satisfaction with both modalities.

Figure 5. Satisfaction based on Modality.

Figure 6. Satisfaction with Instructor Accessibility based on Modality.
Geography was similarly identified as a potential site of importance. Both physical geographies and online geographies were taken into account. Participants were asked to identify if they would be able to find places or things either on Western’s campus or through Western’s online apparatus. This topic was also expanded on in the qualitative research cycle. Figure 7 shows the responses to the question of how well participants believe they could navigate the physical geography of WWU. The responses are quite interesting as they show that participants are, at the time of responding, fairly confident in their abilities to navigate the physical geography with 56% responding that they know how to navigate the Western’s campus. However, this does cast a shadow of doubt as 44% of respondents aren’t entirely confident in their abilities to navigate campus, which could be potentially problematic as this is just under half of the 285 participants. Turning to the online geography, similar results pop up as shown in Figure 8. This time around, 54% of participants would rank themselves as confident in their abilities to navigate WWU’s online apparatus while 46% are either unsure or not confident in their abilities. These responses are quite frightening as in both cases, the results show that about half of the participants are at least uncomfortable or unconfident in their abilities to navigate Western both digitally and physically.
Qualitative

The bulk of this work has been spent on qualitative data collection and analysis. Utilizing the background data from the cursory survey and its “snapshot” of campus, questions were developed in order to dive deeper into the happenings on campus post-transition. Three prompts were developed. The first prompt was an inquiry into what “good” or “satisfactory” instruction was, and how it interacted with the modalities that students experienced. The second prompt focused on accessibility, an amalgam of questions from the survey including the questions of geography and instructor accessibility. The final prompt was the simplest; asking if they could recount an experience, or personal story, from the return to in-person learning.

**Instruction**
- How would you all define good instruction?
  - What is this notion of satisfaction?
  - Is this different Online vs. In-Person?

**Accessibility**
- What does accessibility mean to you?
  - Is there a difference in-class and out of class?
  - Is there a difference between online and in-person?
  - What about physical and digital geography?

**Stories**
- When you think about your experiences shifting from online learning back to in-person learning are there any stories or memories that stand out?

Data collection occurred over the course of three focus groups and two interviews. These were recorded, transcribed, and coded. The resulting code, FIRBO, encapsulates Folk Knowledge, Interaction, Resources, Barriers, and Openness as themes which arose from within the data. With
this emergence, the themes were often interacting with one another, leading to overlapping and shared features. Perspectives on the themes are at times conflicting, as the code locates sites within the discourse where the transition is visible.

**Folk Knowledge**

Folk Knowledge is defined as the informal networks through which information and support are transferred between individuals; often carrying generational or experiential information. Appearing in the discourse in relation to its disruption, by the online period, and the creation of an entirely new data set with the transition back. *Daisy Oxeye* described this notion of Folk Knowledge, saying:

> it seems like there's a lot of like information in like how the university is traditionally run is like, it exists in like this, like collective, like mind space that like, if you don't have that, like, cyclical connection to like, the people from the year before and the year before that like just completely disappears because it's like, because everything is so convoluted (Daisy Oxeye, FG1, 00:42:18).

Particularly important in this description are the notions of cyclicality, or even reflexivity, and the ability of this information to disappear as a result of the convoluted context it is derived from. These features of Folk Knowledge are important to understanding how students are perceiving, whether by name or through discourse, this loss and recreation of the information network.

Folk Knowledge appears within the discourse connected to the notions of physical and digital geography, as a response to the questions asking about the ability of the participants to locate places or things on campus. Knowledge of the physical campus and the resources offered made visible the gaps in information on areas such as ATUS (Academic Technology and User
Services) and other student facing departments, such as the Student Technology Center, which offer access to resources such as microphones and other technologies. To quote Goku from dragon ball: “No one told me there was an office you can just rent equipment at until like I needed to do a project a few weeks ago” (Goku from dragon ball, FG1, 00:38:30). This notion of not knowing about resources until the student needs to know they exist is repeated throughout the responses to these prompts. Unknowns weave their way into this discourse in a paradoxical way. Simultaneously, not knowing something is the reason for this collective informal information network while also keeping this information set from being accessed. In the Dilemmas section, I identify this tension as Unknown and Known Unknowns. The difference being things you are aware of not knowing and are not aware of not knowing.

The knowledge of Western’s digital apparatus is also seemingly mediated by this community knowledge system. Rupert describes an instance of this information transference when learning about navigating the Western website: “I was at a, with someone helping me with the website and the person said, don't ever use Western's website to look for something. Type it directly into the web browser that you're using, and it will give you the link” (Rupert FG3, 00:12:16). This work around also appeared repeatedly throughout the sessions as Western’s website was seen as labyrinthine, particularly when attempting to find sections of the website when in the website. Web browsers are seen as a work around as adding keywords brings up the links to these particular locations.

Interaction

Interaction is the way in which students encounter and communicate with their peers, faculty, and staff to create their social environments. Appearing from a repetition of responses highlighting the importance of communication, this relational theme focuses on the dynamics
between students and faculty, as well as students and the spaces they inhabit, including the other students by whom they are surrounded. There is a significant overlap with notions of enthusiasm, not necessarily in the mannerisms of the instructor, but instead in how the instructor presents the courses they teach. A repeated refrain was that taking classes with instructors who enjoyed or were invested in the subject were often much better than courses where instructors were seen as being present out of obligation. This theme also saw a significant focus on the creation of networks and relationships, particularly with instructors. Interlocutor 1 stated outright: “what's important to me is that teacher student interaction. Being able to form a working relationship, professional relationship with the professor” (Interlocutor II, 00:07:20).

Check-ins were similarly seen as important. Mentioned across the focus groups and interviews, check-ins are seen as points of contact between students and their instructors. This interaction is meant to locate the student and how they are performing within the course, but must give space for students to contextualize themselves, something which interacts with the fifth theme, openness. Paul posited that “good instruction is checking in on students” (Paul Focus Group 1, 00:02:22). This does place the responsibility on the shoulders of instructors, which is contested by Ethan who claimed: “I'd say that they [students and instructors] both should have like a willingness to engage with one another, and they should both be aware to how the other is feeling and receiving the information. That has to be an element of, I'd say, awareness of self and others.” (Ethan FG3, 00:02:20). Ethan places the responsibility on both students and instructors, hammering in this notion of relationships between instructors and students. There is additionally an identification of “communication” and “incorporation of feedback” highlighted by Alex, who translates this notion of relations into the way in which course work is done, suggesting that
feedback as a method of communication and as check in is quite different from marking up an assignment that cannot be responded to.

Students also perceive themselves as interacting with the rooms they inhabit. This involves not just the other instructor but also the other people inhabiting the rooms and the way that said rooms are organized. For instance, Interlocutor 2 claimed a reliance on the people in the room to help them stay focused, “I learn best in a classroom setting where there’s other people around me, basically to, like, hold me accountable” (Interlocutor Interview 2, 00:01:01). Interlocutor 2 uses the classrooms they inhabit as a way to keep themselves on task and accountable for their work, which has important implications for how classrooms are formed. Particularly returning from the Zoom era when this surveillance system was either less of a feature, opting out of using a camera, or more blatant, a camera directly in front of you recording your every action. Another student referenced Zoom features as something which they miss having available to them. Cooper mentions the whiteboard function in Zoom as something which made the classroom more interactive (Cooper FG2, 00:06:17). Through the whiteboard, they could actively communicate their ideas with the class, as there was space made for this type of interaction in the classroom, in this case the Zoom classroom. Both of these examples point towards an affordance of space, which is interactional in nature, either through the presence of others to effect individual agency or through allowing individuals to utilize space and interact with the classroom, in the example from Cooper actively altering the space/room in conversation with the class.

Resources

Resources are material and social capital. Within the discourse, resources were seen primarily in the courses students were taking. Resources do appear elsewhere in discussions of access and what is made available by the university, connecting the themes of resources and
barriers. Focusing on resources within courses; online resources, recorded lectures, and hybrid options were heavily repeated. These resources give students access to additional time reviewing subjects, through additional online resources or through listening to lectures. This acts as a method of addressing the gaps in information caused by missing classes or not understanding a lecture or lesson. For instance, recorded lectures allow students to study the exact lectures they missed or struggled with the added ability to pause, slow down, or speed up the playback to fit their needs. Recorded lectures in this way are seen as additive to or capable of replacing the practice of assigning readings for missed days.

Online resources were seen as particularly useful. Patt goes as far as to claim that “the best instructors had a lot of online resources” (Patt FG1, 00:05:08). This availability to do extra review can make the difference for students who need extra time with subjects or need other framings to understand the subject. Interlocutor 2 also cited lecture slides on Canvas as particularly helpful (Interlocutor I2, 00:02:43). This is an interesting in for instructors as lectures can be recorded on the PowerPoints themselves. Posting slides like additional online resources gets into the issue of further review, while also being loyal to what was presented in the lecture itself. With the availability of the PowerPoint or recorded lectures, the student has access to nearly the same experience as the students who were in attendance.

Recorded Lectures made an appearance in every session in the qualitative cycle. This repetition is warranted when taking into account what students have to say about them. For the purposes of reviewing information, either to make up an absence or as a means of studying freshly recorded lectures or class sessions, the recorded lecture was spoken about with near-universal excitement Alex stated “the ability to watch, playback a lecture … That’s great. That’s great.” (Alex FG2, 00:09:33). Daisy Oxeye sums up these perceptions quite well, claiming that recorded
lectures “can be really helpful because it’s like you can’t catch everything in class the first time. And if you can like, listen back to it, it’s like really good for like getting more of that detail” (Daisy Oxeye FG1, 00:08:58). Another aspect of recorded lectures is the ability to control pacing, as students have the ability to slow down or speed up the playback speed. This allows for students to set their own pacing: something which Interlocutor 1 utilized to get through a class. They say: “I had to watch recorded lectures and take notes, and what I end up doing was I ended up playing it to speed and then pausing it at whenever I needed to write something down which worked, which worked for me” (Interlocutor I1, 00:07:43).

Hybrid Technologies, like the Zoom white board mentioned in the interaction section, were seen as something which is being removed unnecessarily. Students showed a desire for hybrid modalities to remain in some format, often citing the advantages of being able to shift to online in cases of sickness or other complications. Interlocutor 2 was claimed that this option was something a few of their friends “really liked” as it gave them the option to maintain their health (Interlocutor I2, 00:06:12). Alex also expanded the discussion of resources outside of the classroom or instruction and posited that online office hours have been a great advantage as meetings can be scheduled and handled online rather than attempting to meet during a period of time which may have scheduling conflicts (Alex Focus Group 2, 00:22:42).

Barriers

Barriers are physical and social phenomena which render resources and interactions inaccessible. As the most expansive theme in the data, barriers extends well into the dilemmas discussed below. Marking the entire period of lockdown, barriers were informative to the transition out of the online period. Social factors were one of the most common sites where barriers were perceived. At the time this research was conducted, there was still a hesitance towards being in
large groups of people or interacting with people after the extended period of social distancing and technology mediated interaction. Patt reported “I’m a lot more scared of people than I used to be” (Patt FG1, 00:53:08) while Bartholomew claimed, “coming back to in-person was a very like large commitment, like socially and emotionally, just like going back to being in, like in a room with 150 other people after spending multiple years being scared to be around like groups of more than five people” (Bartholomew FG2, 00:18:57). Both of these statements highlight the transition occurring during the time this research was performed.

These features are still influencing the way that students experience education today. For instance, Goku from dragon ball differentiated raising a hand in class and writing emails with questions (Goku from dragonball, FG1, 00:04:12). This differentiation posits hand raising as more difficult than using mediated interaction such as email; this is due in part to the social pressures associated with the space. In this example students with similar perspectives to Goku from dragonball prefer the mediation of barriers or, as Sheamus puts it, “another filter” on the interaction (Sheamus FG1, 00:03:57). This filter creates a distance between members of the interaction, and while raising your hand in class has always been stressful for many students, this contextualization of the feature can be addressed, for instance through tools like the whiteboard mentioned by Cooper in Focus Group 2.

Another notion, which is similar to raising hands in the way it recontextualizes a pre-existing phenomenon, is logics surrounding struggling. Patt mentions these logics as a feature of being a student:

I also think so there’s the aspect of stigma and then there’s this sort of normalization on college campuses that you’re supposed to be really struggling. You’re supposed to be dealing with insomnia. You’re supposed to be unable to get out of bed in the morning.
You’re supposed to not be able to understand anything in a lecture, and that’s normal … I think part of that normalization means a lot of people who could be getting support and are paying for support through the university aren’t (Patt FG1, 00:34:01).

This logic, again similar to other recontextualized phenomenon, questions the expectations of students from students and instructors as well as the contexts and histories that created these expectations or perceptions. This is particularly apt because of the logic at work in the transition to in-person recontextualized these phenomena as a product of education being too loose and the struggles of students having to do with not holding them to higher expectations. The solution, as a feature of the transition, to these barriers and the shocks which caused them, is to create another instance of shock, in this case meaning a quick and disorienting transition. An unintentional side effect of this is of course that these phenomena of the past appear to us as new even if the problem remains the same but the context through which we see it is changed.

Notions of Access were also heavily explored as a barrier for students. From the organization of the university’s Disability Access Center to the physical geography of the university, students implicated the ways in which access is being perceived as impeded. Paul was particularly vocal about this issue implicating the location of the testing center, being off campus (00:41:27), as well as the DAC requiring documentation of disabilities but not an affordable and fast way of attaining said documentation, allowing people to “fall through the cracks” (00:27:57). Both of these implications had to do with their personal experiences at the university which were, from their descriptions, quite fraught with bureaucratic responses to requests for help, in the face of a return to normalcy. Another side effect of this transition back has been the slow drawback of Owl cameras noticed by Interlocutor 2 who caught COVID during the fall of 2023 and could not attend or access their class: “there was no way for me to, like, access the classes.” (Interlocutor I2,
00:07:05). This would not have been an issue in a class the Spring beforehand when students could request a zoom link and still participate in class despite being sick. Interlocutor 2 also went on to describe the dangers of Western’s campus, where loose brickwork and the oddly formed walkways create tripping hazards for their friends with disabilities, impacting their movement (00:10:37).

One of the participants, Sheamus, was able to describe their experiences attempting to find the Veterans Office on campus. They pointed out the issues navigating campus’ physical geography, particularly with a lack of folk knowledge:

Because, I went through it recently. So I'm a veteran, right? Yeah. The Veterans Office, this is going to be me specifically whining about this. The Veterans Office has a room that's listed as next to the Disability Access Center and it says, No, go to this other room in another building. You go there and they're like, No, it's not actually in the VU it's in the building that's connected to the vu, but it has a different number, but it still has the same acronym at the front of it. And then you go into the, the veterans, like the actual veterans area and there's like no one there, like there are people working there. But because it's like a game of mousetrap to try and find this room, like we have buildings, we have like older buildings. I remember walking in, and they had a note taped to the directory that said none of these are accurate check online. And I'm like, If you had the time to print out something that said check online, you could print it from online and hang it here. Like, why would you do that? (Sheamus FG1, 00:40:31).

Sheamus’ experiences are not uncommon when first attempting to find locations on campus. This barrier is particularly nasty, due in part to the bureaucratic labyrinth that it creates for those attempting to find resources. Having places on campus such as the Veterans Office be clearly labeled and findable for those who are in need of that space is important, as the resources they can
provide assist in the transition to higher education. This is an issue of legibility as much as it is access as the physical campus is illegible without a priori knowledge of the campus.

Openness

Openness is the degree to which people are adaptable to the needs, desires, and expectations of other people. As a theme, Openness significantly intersects with interaction; it is the interaction or communication put into action. Check-ins as a form of interaction can then be utilized to alter the space being created by a class or by a group on campus. In this sense, interaction is the first step and openness is the second step, only possible after the initial encounter. As a result, Collaboration as a sub-theme emerges within openness across the focus groups and interviews. Interlocutor 1 and Rupert both bring up aspects of this as they describe the features they perceive as necessary in an instructor’s teaching style. For Interlocutor 1, it is a willingness to take feedback and be responsive to being told that a teaching style “isn’t working” for them (00:02:24). In Rupert’s case, the focus is on taking feedback into account in order to make the course “engaging” to the audience (00:02:35). In both of these cases, the instructor is posited as being in a position of power and needs to make moves towards spreading that power around the classroom. This is quite interesting as the impetus is always on the shoulders of the instructor to make moves towards increasing the malleability of the course. Interlocutor 1 continues to specify this point through describing how classes, in order to be good instruction, require an amount of interactivity, and a decentralization of lecturing, which further places responsibility on students and instructors (00:00:36).

Accommodation also arose as a significant component of Openness. In Focus Group 1, Sheamus and Daisy Oxeye both raised points that furthered a perspective of universalizing accommodations, with Daisy putting it in very simple terms “if you think they’re an advantage,
just like give it to everyone” (00:20:58) and later on “maybe you should be looking at why students are more successful when you do this for them. And like if that’s the case, then you [should] just be doing it for all students.” (00:29:37). Sheamus went on to argue that the act of reaching out for help is worthy of an accommodation “even if they were deemed by some like, regimented system not to qualify, they’re still making it known they need help.” (00:31:30). Universalizing accommodations was an aspect of the online period which has been stripped down. Reconnecting to Malesic’s call for higher expectations, at what point are higher expectations in conflict with a model of accessibility? The roll backs following the transition to in-person learning have stripped potential futures and opportunities to increase access.

**FIRBO**

Put together, this code acts as an interpretive lens, derived from student perspectives, through which student perspectives can be viewed, interpreted, and understood. The major themes within FIRBO are interactions and barriers. These are the root and stem around which folk knowledge, resources, and openness position themselves. In this model, interactions and barriers are the trunk of the tree while the other three themes exist as branches growing or forming in relation to how interactions and barriers are occurring effecting students and their perspectives. FIRBO can be positioned to view the ways in which --- nostalgia presents itself, within the discourses of students. As such this interpretive lens can be utilized in order to foster responses to this nostalgia, particularly how we go about dealing with the features it projects into the future.

**Dilemmas**

One of the advantages of performing qualitative research and specifically looking into discourse is the revelation of what Hornberger terms “paradoxical tensions” which are tensions
which are not internally consistent both interpersonally and within individuals (Hornberger 2020, 121). Encountering these tensions and the dilemmas or disjunctions which they form and or represent has been a fundamental part of this study. Alongside the creation of the in vivo code this has been one of the greatest tools for seeing how students are framing their experiences at Western. There are a number of dilemmas located, including: nostalgia (which has already been described in the introduction as a fundamental function of the transitions), cheating, and the interaction of access and rest.

These dilemmas, despite being viewed from the perspective of Western students, are shared by actors across the university community. As such the lens this project approaches these dilemmas with is incomplete. Nostalgia is rested in the university’s faculty and administration as much as it is in students. To varying extents, these dilemmas are rooted in the interaction between these university actors and as such, the position of this project being rooted in student perspectives can still point towards these much larger relations which are at play. Though to address these dilemmas a critical lens must similarly view post transition perspectives of these university actors in conjunction with the perspectives of students. This is expanded in the Proffers section below.

**Cheating**

One of the boons of the qualitative research cycle is the affordance of repetition and adjustment. For instance, Focus Group two, which was the final focus group from Spring quarter saw the topic of cheating emerge. As a result, I was able to integrate cheating into the prompts for the second round the next fall, Focus group 3 and interview 2. The results have been enlightening and cohesive. It was also the case that Alex, one of the participants in Focus Group 2 had been caught cheating in their freshman year at western, bringing a sense of perspective to the situation. In their description their situation boiled down to putting off an important assignment,
subsequently forgetting it existed, and then experiencing to quote Alex “fear of failure mixed with like unwillingness to actually communicate” (Alex FG2, 00:27:53). These three factors are central to cheating and interact with the themes in the data, as cheating is made possible through the way that courses are designed (openness) and cheating is also a reaction to a lack of communication (interaction). *Interlocutor 2* explains cheating as a phenomenon as a response to a fear of failure and particularly “getting a bad grade” (00:18:05). This responsive view of cheating sees a mishap or position of inability on the student side and an inability or unwillingness to communicate with the appropriate people, faculty, or organizations like the DAC.

*Cooper* provides a perspective on the rolling back of accommodations, in line with the arguments made in the New York Times article above, where in accommodations “lead to cheating” because they provide students with time and resources in completing their assignments. This view positions the availability of accommodations as the problem rather than the assignments in need of accommodations which have time limits or other such limitations that may or may not be conducive to the learning process.

**Nostalgia**

It is the case that this study is temporally bound, and as such is not a living document. The particular time that I performed this research is past, and while the insights provided by this research can still be utilized it is still the case that more research must be done, constantly, to stay up to date with what is occurring in the realm of perceptions. *Daisy Oxeye* describes the argument being made by this paper quite concisely saying “that to, like just throw out the gains that were made with like no thought and just being like, okay, we’re going back … there can’t be a going back to the way things were” (Daisy Oxeye FG1, 00:50:30). *Alex* later made a statement which highlights this incapacity to return to a before time “I had good relationships with my professors
before Covid and then that just kind of died” something about what happened during the covid era so radically altered continuity that people who knew each other can describe their relationship as dead. Simply returning does not address this matter, as much as it highlights the fact that this happened, the problems and features of both the before times and the covid era are being drawn into the present by our assertion that we are “returning” to an imagined past without critically analyzing what that blatant disregard of context is doing.

Access and Rest

The usage of hybrid technologies, including canvas, unbinds education from text books and campuses and makes them available to students in every waking hour of the day. College now takes place on your phone, tablet, computer, and potentially even your fridge depending on the model. This unbinding is a double edged sword, which was exemplified during the covid era and online classes. The blurred lines between personal and educational time have continued to the now with the availability (for the most part) of hybrid learning options.

This was raised as a topic of conversation in focus group 1 and by Cooper in focus group 2. The discussion in focus group 1 followed an exchange in which Sheamus described a class mate being able to transition from having surgery to picking up an iPad and Zoom into class (Sheamus FG1, 00:15:13). Paul offered an opposing perspective that while that is impressive and an option “People do need their rest, especially if you’re recovering from a surgery.” (Paul FG1, 00:15:49) and went on to posit a general devaluation of students physical and mental health as school becomes increasingly integrated with their lives outside of the university. Cooper saw this hybrid potential as a boon: “The opportunity to be able to be in a class still is like a really good And I mean, they were doing that before Covid and everything, but like I don't know … life happens and like I still want to be able to go to class sometimes and like, I can, but I just can't physically be
there.” (Cooper Fg2, 00:07:55). The complexities of this dynamic are cause for thought, how do we move forward? How can we create an equitable future?

This hybrid modality is in a sense both weal and woe, having the potential to increase access to the point where we can be sick, in a state where we are still capable of learning, and be able to attend class, or in other cases have life occur in such a way that the consistent time of the class must be interrupted and still be able to go about participating. On the other hand, if this becomes a rule rather than an option, attendance policies could fully disallow missing classes, because you could still Zoom in post-surgery. Hybrid should be an option for students who are in a state where they are capable of learning, not as a way to remove the sick day. Placing myself in alignment with Paul, rest is important.

Proffers

As part of this project, I have recognized that this study is a first step, this work is a piece of something that should be expanded on and as such this section serves as a method of gifting to you where further research needs to be done. You may of course opt out and choose not to pick up one of these gifts, but if something strikes your fancy, I offer it up to you, even if it is as simple as a personal inquiry, something to think about. It is my current opinion that research into student perceptions should be included in the university’s policies. There is a trove of data lying beyond the realm of surveys, which are far too long, and have too few respondents. The insights which can be gained through a deeper dive, looking at the trees to understand the forest, are invaluable for the university. However, this work should be expanded to encompass more perspectives than just the perspectives of the student population, there is context missing by having the perceptions of faculty and the university administration not taken into account. This broadening would
contextualize how the component parts of the university exist and function in relation to one another.

The issue raised in the section on Folk Knowledge of transforming unknown unknowns into known unknowns is also something which should be interrogated. This process is central to increasing the legibility and visibility of resources at Western. Quite simply people have to know that there are things to look for. Increasing visibility of these resources, be it technology, programs, financial assistance, allows for students to broaden their potential actions, projects, and time at Western. How can this information be disseminated in such a way that it is not overwhelming?

Additionally, a dilemma which I was exposed to briefly from the student side and through conversations about the project, so not within the bounds of the study itself, was the notion that higher education is an economic function. This occurred in two primary ways which are ripe for interrogation, as they are both common and powerful logics. The first is that the university is the pathway to more money and better opportunities, and as such higher education should be preparing you for the work force. This came up particularly in regards to the tightening of accommodations and the reinforcement of grading and attendance policies. Quite simply is this actually the case? Is higher education, or to make this question local is Western Washington University preparing students for the work force and are attendance policies and grades effective in preparing students for the workforce? This question also does not take into account the oppositional perspectives that higher education is a work of expanding the self, being exposed to new ideas and learning how to think critically. The second economic logic is that because students are paying the university that they need to be handed the tools, much like an assembly line, and that they are owed what they paid for. This logic is something to be explored, particularly its impetus and how it affects education more broadly.
Conclusions

This text attempts to position itself as an open text, in the spirit of Hejinian’s “The Rejection of Closure” (Hejinian 2000) as such I admit that the work is not yet finished, and never will be. Positioning this research as a momentary view, a glance at something which is in need of many more glances, while attempting to create a jumping off point for next steps leaving the door open for more to grow out of the work done here.

Over the course of 2023 and the first two quarters of 2024 I have encountered nostalgias which reside both within the perceptions of students and within the institutional policies which are shaping the way in which education is done at Western. The shift to in-person learning modalities is an opportunity, still not yet gone to stop, think critically, and make an accounting of the features from both the in-person learning modalities of “the before times” as well as from the COVID-induced period of online learning. An account of the tools which we utilized is in order, and a collective imagining of what an educational future looks like which takes the tools of the online period and integrates them into an in-person learning modality. This potential future, itself becoming an act of nostalgia, is a moment worth advocating for. This nostalgia encompasses student experiences at Western, evident in their responses to ethnographic questioning. The opportunities provided by the online period and the nostalgia for a past which is gone must be reconciled in order to craft or construct a future which best caters to the needs of students.

Utilizing tools of analysis such as FIRBO allows for a method of contextualizing how students have responded to the particular cultural moment they were living in. These features are sites of potential interrogation and implication, lines of inquiry that could lead to a system of higher education at Western which is driven by the needs of its students and particularly by its own espoused value of equity.
References


