SHAPING ENGLISH LANGAUGE INSTRUCTION TO THE VESSEL OF REMOTE LEARNING

Rita L. Naughton, Ph.D.[*]

Assistant Professor, Institute for Language Education, Southern New Hampshire University

Abstract

The unforeseen shift to remote learning, as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, brought about drastic changes to the delivery of an MS TEFL Pronunciation course. The purpose of this article is to explore the demands placed upon teaching and learning pronunciation techniques remotely as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. It presents the challenges and opportunities that occurred during an eleven-week term involving solely online synchronous delivery. It will reveal approaches for achieving favorable and encouraging results in a remote learning environment.

Introduction

In December 2019 in Wuhu, China, a coronavirus was identified that would change the course of how one lives, works, and communicates with the outside world (CDC, 2020). This new "flu like" virus was given the name COVID-19 on February 11th, 2020 by the World Health Organization. As many have discovered in the months that followed, this virus with mild symptoms such as fever, cough, and sore throat to sever symptoms such as shortness of breath, persistent pain/pressure in the chest, and high temperature exceeding 100.4 °F (38 °C) has resulted in a pandemic in which this silent killer wages war against humanity (WHO, 2020). In March 2020, the number of cases and deaths were rising at an alarming rate that the daily increase of confirmed global cases on March 9th, 2020 was 4,007 and confirmed deaths was 225, 77.17%, higher than the day before (WHO Dashboard, 2020). It was on March 11th, 2020, when Southern New Hampshire University Professor Rita Naughton received a university announcement suspending face-to-face instruction. The suspension, which was echoed at other educational institutes, businesses, and organization in New Hampshire, was a concerted effort to "flatten the curve" by avoiding contact with people to prevent exposure and transmission [of the coronavirus] (Qualls, 2017). This is where this narrative of shaping English language teaching to remote learning online begins.

Background

After receiving the university announcement to full delivery of courses online on March 29th, 2020, Naughton was uncertain how the Master of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (MS TEFL) course she was about to teach would function in a new delivery mode. It is important to note here that this article will discuss remote online instruction as opposed to instruction delivered fully online. The two are distinct:

- Remote instruction is most often a solution to developing and facilitating a course curriculum in times of face-to-face class interruptions (e.g., a scheduled absence, a snow day or an

emergency). Instruction is designed in a responsive manner by instructors, and often delivered through an instructor's preferred technology to best meet course outcomes under the circumstances of the interruption (CITL, 2020).

- Online instruction is the facilitation that occurs in a course that has been developed with the intention for fully online delivery. Instructional experiences are designed in a planned manner, over weeks and months, most often with support of an instructional designer and a media services team (CITL, 2020).

Naughton not only faced teaching in a new delivery mode remotely but also teaching, for the first time, a master's course in pronunciation: a course that at its essence is hands-on, interactive, and it commands active participation. This particular pronunciation course involves the use of drama in teaching English pronunciation techniques, a quality that was bestowed on this course by Naughton's predecessor, an expert in the field of second language acquisition and pronunciation techniques through drama.

Naughton's pronunciation course comprised of five native and non-native graduate students. At the time, teaching a masters of TESOL course with only five students was fairly reassuring, considering many international graduate and undergraduate students had decided to return to their home countries in the wake of the corona virus pandemic. Their decisions were based on safety and the realization that they would not be able to glean the full experience of studying and living abroad in the U.S. If they continued remotely in their dorm rooms, many feared not being able to return to their home countries at a later date. Limitations placed on student visas and the travel bands that followed the nation-wide shutdown further accelerated the drop of international students: "The number of international students at U.S. universities fell by about 20,000 to 1,075,000 in 2019/2020, a drop of 1.8% on the previous year" (Morrison, 2020). Knowing that this pronunciation course would still run online with five students was quite encouraging to Naughton. The concern of teaching for the first time in an online environment was there but so was the peace of mind that the course would continue.

According to the course catalogue description, the Pronunciation Techniques course would begin with a review of the International Phonetic Alphabet (the IPA) and the American English sound system. It would then proceeds to a diagnosis of individual student pronunciation problems. Along the way, explanations and descriptions of techniques to improve pronunciation and activities to teach proper formation of consonants, vowels, and diphthongs would be given. Focus would be placed on practice with connected speech, word/sentence stress, and intonation patterns would be emphasized through drama related activities.

In preparing to teach this course, Naughton sought strategies that could be applied remotely online. As stated by Means et al. (2009), "Online learning can be enhanced by giving learners control of their interactions with media and prompting learner reflection." In this course, students would certainly have to take ownership of their learning and prepare lessons that would present their proper application and understanding of pronunciation techniques. The online environment has the potential to advance the skills of problem solving and self-examination: "Studies indicate that manipulations that trigger learner activity or learner reflection and self-monitoring of understanding are effective when students pursue online learning as individuals" (Means et al., 2008).

Before the end of March, the two-week suspension of in-person classes was extended until the end of the semester to ensure the upmost safety measures for the students, faculty, and staff at the university. With that understanding in place, the pronunciation course began on March 31st with the following objectives, which students would be able to do upon completion of the course:

- Identify any pronunciation problems they may have and will work to overcome them so that they may accurately model standard North American English to their learners.
- Diagnose pronunciation problems in their learners and design and implement activities that will lead to clarified speech through standard use of stress, intonation, pitch, linking, and use of reductions.
- Organize, rehearse, and produce dramatic productions for pronunciation purposes.

Changes

To prepare for the change from in-person to remote instruction for the 11-week course beginning at the end of March, Naughton wrote a welcome letter to her students. In it, she updated the students on what to expect regarding instruction delivery due to the interruption brought about by COVID 19. Naughton highlighted the resources to be used throughout the semester. Here are the resources utilized by Naughton, followed by her strategy, rational, and reflection.

- RingCentral™ meetings: I was new at using the online meeting platform RingCentral™ meetings (a Zoom™ product). Nonetheless, I told my students that we would be learning to use this online platform together. I reassured them that the meeting site is user friendly, and it would allow us to video conference for the entire 3 hours and 15 minutes. At the time, I intended to follow the schedule for the master courses as I always have. These courses met once a week for three hours and fifteen minutes. I did not think, at the time, that there were any other options. I did reiterate to my students that they would receive a 15 break. I also created a calendar reminder and link to join the class meetings, which the students would receive via email weekly. In retrospect, I did not know how mentally draining three hours of online instruction would be. Since then, I have conducted my courses with synchronous and asynchronous class meetings:
  - "Synchronous online learning means that students are required to log-in and participate in class at a specific time each week" (Scheiderer, 2020).
  - "Asynchronous online learning allows students to view instructional materials each week at any time they choose and does not include a live video lecture component" (Scheiderer, 2020).

In my letter to the students, I explained that the class will be focusing on teaching pronunciation and that it is very important that we can see and hear one another, share our opinions and questions, and fully engage in the class material. The success of using RingCentral™ depended on ALL logging in at the same time every week and contributing to class discussion via the video and audio options. The course required making specific sounds and practicing pronunciation techniques. Students were encouraged to assist and affirm one another in the pronunciation practice.

- Brightspace™: The Learning Management System (LMS) at SNHU is Brightspace™. In my letter, I stated I would use Brightspace™ to take attendance, post grades, make announcements, collect assignments, and share links, reading materials, and images. I also mentioned that in some cases, I may send a video through Brightspace™ or may ask the students to send me videos. I did send one video of me via Brightspace™ before our first class, but we did not utilize the video feature as much as I had thought. Rather, students used

the voice recording feature in their recitation of an excerpt form of the theatrical production, *Iolanthe*.

- Microsoft™ PowerPoint: For every class, I prepared a PowerPoint which presented the highlights of the reading material and provide additional explanation and examples on the themes and topics of discussion. All PowerPoints were submitted to the students' course Brightspace™ page after the class meetings, so they would have an ongoing record of their lessons. In this way, they could easily access their lessons' slides at any time.

- Syllabus– The syllabus is not an online tool, yet I emphasized in my letter that I would be scheduling assignments with flexibility in mind. The syllabus explained the course, the objectives, and the assignments, but it did not include a semester long schedule. The schedule was presented in segments to ensure flexibility and a low stress environment. I did offer to give a schedule overview if there were students who wanted to know the upcoming topics and assignments. According to Warschauer et al. (2000), there are a variety of variables affecting teaching in an online environment: content, pacing, the teacher's role, technology, course credit, and cost (pp. 76–77). Of these variables, the ones that underwent a significant transformation in the new remote online environment for the Pronunciation course were content, pacing, teacher's role and technology.

- Textbook– Even though I opted to use the same textbooks as were previously assigned to this course, I had the added advantage that one of them was available online as a free PDF. The online availability of the text ensured that students would have access to the text to practice the phenomes, stress, and intonation. This was particularly helpful for one student who had opted to return to her home country during the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. Ordering textbooks from the U.S. was not option for this student who was no longer living on campus. Another benefit of the online textbook was the ease it afforded when there was a need to refer to specific textbook content; a particular page could be easily shared on the screen during online remote instruction.

- Resources– I was fortunate enough to have access to a scanner in my home office which allowed me to scan handouts and textbook pages for those students who were unable to gain access to these materials. This process took a bit longer than if the class were being taught in person and students could share a book, or I could make a few photocopies before class. In general, teaching the pronunciation course online took longer than expected and required more flexibility. I had to learn to become accustomed to using RingCentral™ video meetings. There was a learning curve in respect to sharing my screen, adjusting the computer audio, accessing, and using the chat feature, remembering to mute and unmute, and allowing for interruptions due to internet connection issues. The latter at times affected the starting and ending time of class. I had students taking this course in various states and countries.

In respect to resources outside the class meetings environment, the university was amazing in the support they offered the students and teachers; many online tools and services were provided. Yet, with the deluge of support and the immediacy of teaching the course, time to truly practice these new tools and absorb the new technology was limited. Luckily, the students were fairly skilled in accessing their learning management system, Brightspace™, and I experimented with creating online videos, using discussion boards, and providing additional support through the dissemination of copious information in the course modules' page on Brightspace™.

Naughton's role as a teacher went through a metamorphosis throughout the online teaching experience. She found herself guiding the students in their learning, frequently checking in with each one of them and providing the extra resources necessary in the new learning environment Naughton took it upon herself to be motivator, overseer, coach, empathizer, and co-learner. There were more check-in's, office hour meetings, and revising of the course schedule. Nonetheless, the online remote environment did cultivate a supportive, accommodating and encouraging culture of learning.

Challenges

Lessons and Lesson Plans

A required assignment in the Pronunciation course is the designing and implementation of practical, relevant, and effective lesson plans that address pronunciation learning goals and objectives. The course textbook, *How to Teach Pronunciation* by Gerald Kelly is an excellent guide for such assignments since chapters "contain a range of sample lesson which demonstrate integrated remedial and practice lesson types" (Kelly, 2000). These lessons necessitate a feel for the language, opportunities to listen to the sounds (phenomes) of the language, the need to identify the phonemes, repeat them in both isolation and with contrasting pairs, and to "integrate pronunciation work with a treatment of grammar and lexis in order to help students appreciate its relevance and importance for successful communication" (Kelly, 2000).

In the remote learning environment, the students were faced with challenges in teaching their pronunciation lessons. Frist of all, they were limited to the virtual space and their computer microphone and audio system. At times, their lighting and background sounds posed additional impediments, and unlike previous years, they would teach to themselves since the opportunities to teach in ESL classrooms were unavailable due to the coronavirus.

The preparation of the lessons would go as planned; students were still required to follow a lesson plan template end deliver the lessons, as if they were working with ESL learners. Yet, in their present situation, the students would need to be creative in the delivery of these online lessons since they could not physically teach a pronunciation game, pass out pronunciation cards for practice, employ realia, or utilize the classroom white boards for learning. When the students delivered their lessons, they, often did a bit more explaining then teaching; nonetheless, their creativity was heightened, and they discovered how to teach pronunciation games by emailing instructions ahead of time to their classmates, using realia they had at home to enhance the lessons, using their own white boards, and designating roles to their classmates in order to meet the objectives of the lesson and create inclusivity and cooperation in the learning environment.

Sharing lesson plans on course content modules

As the students presented their pronunciation lessons in the course, they found great values in their classmates' lessons, and unanimously requested that these lessons be available to them. To clarify, each student submitted their lesson plans and materials to Naughton, and then, they taught their lessons to their classmates. The students request to share their lessons was indicative of their interest in teaching pronunciation and their appreciation of their classmate's lessons. Naughton created a module in Brightspace™ for all of the students' lessons and ensured all course materials, videos, and PPT slides were available to the students on Brightspace™.

Test

In the pronunciation course, a phoneme test is required to test the student's ability to differentiate and produce English phonemes accurately. Not ever having given a test online, Naughton had to strategize how to administer the pronunciation test. On the day of the test, just before its administration, students were told to have their computer cameras on and have access to their emails. Naughton then emailed the test to the students simultaneously. Once the students received their tests, they were asked to begin right way. Naughton closely monitored the students on her computer screen as they took their test. Once the students were done with their tests, they were instructed to immediately email their tests to Naughton.

Audio

Unfortunately, there were some issues with volume and sound clarity in teaching the Pronunciation course. During the online class meetings, the audio worked satisfactorily. Yet, when it came to sharing audio from video clips or CD's, the sound was not loud enough and the clarity was a bit muffled. After a few classes, a determined student, set out to troubleshoot the audio situation. The class discovered a feature on RingCentral™ that maximized the clarity and volume of the sound when sharing video clips: "Check Share Computer Sound: If you check this option, any sound played by your computer will be shared in the meeting" (Zoom Help Center, 2020). The Pronunciation class also uncovered that the sound is clearer when all participants mute their mikes and use the audio coming from their computer and not their earphones or headset.

Assessment

Even though instruction was delivered online and remotely, the following assessments were successfully evaluated online for the corresponding criteria:

- **Lessons & Lesson Demonstrations**
  - o The quality of the students' lesson demonstrations. Students demonstrated creativity and ingenuity in their lesson planning and demonstrations.
- **International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)**
  - o Students' knowledge of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and their ability to transcribe according to the IPA. All the students left the course with a sense of pride in learning a new language, IPA
- **Intonation & Stress**
  - o The students' knowledge of intonation and stress and their ability to replicate English intonation and stress through practice. The students enjoyed learning and practicing the *Stern Method*: jump up and step down in intonation.
- **Phoneme Test**
  - o The students' ability to differentiate and produce English phonemes accurately. Reflected not only in the test grade but also class work.
- **Reader's Theater**
  - o The participation and presentation of a Reader's Theater Play (selection, characterization, dramatic reading, and performance). Students immediately saw the benefits of using drama in teaching pronunciation and were all enthusiastically committed to perform a reader's theater play remotely. Time was given in class for the students to rehearse their lines and "get into character." Students effectively read their lines with the correct pacing, intonation, and stress. The personalities that the students had determined for their characters shined through. Also, the fact the

students had the opportunity to tailor the script made the recitation of it more meaningful and enjoyable.

- **_Iolanthe_**
  - The dramatic reading of "_Iolanthe_"- a musical play that challenges one's use of intonation, stress, and pronunciation. The recitation of "_Iolanthe_" was done on Brightspace™. Students recorded their reading of "_Iolanthe_" in the Assignment Submission section of Brightspace™.

"Breakout Rooms"

Naughton was not familiar with "breakout rooms" (online chat rooms for the students) at the beginning of the Pronunciation course. Naughton later discovered that it is a feature that could be chosen in the creation of the class meeting link and utilized at every class meeting.

"Video Recording"

Faculty are highly encouraged to record their class sessions and provide the recordings after the class meetings. Unfortunately, the recording takes some time to download and can only be sent through the learning management system, Brightspace™ since the files can be quite large.

Opportunities

In teaching the Pronunciation course online, it became quite evident that it is indeed possible to teach pronunciation remotely. One of the highlights was teaching pronunciation through drama. In presenting pronunciation via drama technique, I discovered, as Carkin claims, "Drama in English language courses can enliven the class, support communicative language practices, and spur the development of imaginative interplay among learners. It can also act as a platform for pronunciation practice" (2004). Furthermore, students had the opportunity in this course to "identify the places where interference from a native language would most likely make it difficult for native speakers of a specific languages to hear and then to pronounce the differences that are demonstrated through minimal pairs" (Nilsen, 2010). Teaching remotely due to the coronavirus, was quite new to many educators, yet remote teaching taught us that teaching online is a viable solution that can meet course outcomes and preserve the integrity of a course.

Teaching Approaches and Best Practices

The following are approaches and best practices one can employ in the remote delivery of a course (Husain, 2020). They were used in the pronunciation course and facilitated teaching and learning online.

- Communicate in writing with apps and tools
- Instruct students to keep their videos on
- Encourage discussions
- Assign homework and group work
- Take breaks
- Record lessons
- Post lesson materials online
- Screen share PowerPoints, documents, videos, etc., during the lesson
- Break students into small, collaborative groups.

Findings and Lessons Learned

Student feedback is critical in developing a successful course and providing meaningful learning experiences. Before the end of the 11-week term, Naughton distributed a five question survey to students to assess their experiences with learning remotely. This midterm survey was developed to maximize learning and meet the students' language and learning needs (see Appendix A). Students consented to share their survey answers anonymously for research purposes and the examples that follow are anonymous to protect the rights and privacy of the students. The survey answers reveal what students found valuable in the course, what they would like to learn more about, what recommendations they would make to the course, how they felt the course would benefit their future and what they felt had been the pros and cons of taking the course remotely.

In respect to what the students found most valuable, learning the International Phonetic Alphabet in order to teach their future students' English pronunciation was a the most prevalent answer. For example, students responded:

> *Teaching pronunciation is a learned skill, and one that does not come naturally to me. The exposure and study of the IPA and the thorough practice and application of the IPA has been very helpful to me.* –An MS TEFL Student

> *I think this would be practicing IPA constantly in class and by myself. I actually think it is very useful to know, both for teaching and personally trying to learn new words and improve my pronunciation. And now when I see something written in IPA, I feel proud knowing how to read it.* –An MS TEFL Student

Regarding what aspect of the course students would like to know more about, students expressed wanting to know more about how to teach pronunciation to a particular language cohort and how to teach the different types of English. For example, students responded:

> *I would like to learn about ways to teach pronunciation based on what someone's L1 is. Even if it's just incorporated examples. I would also love to see videos of teachers teaching pronunciation (integrated or remedial) in action. I feel that there is a level of respectfulness and politeness when correcting someone's pronunciation and I would like to learn more.* –An MS TEFL Student

> *I think it would be interesting and useful to talk about how different English language accents and dialects might be represented by the IPA.* –An MS TEFL Student

The above responses indicate a curiosity for teaching pronunciation with care and sensitivity. It also presents the fascination with the various aspects of English pronunciation.

When asked about what recommendations the students would make for the course, recommendations related to the remote learning environment. For example:

> *Not sure. Sorry. The only thing for me that I dislike about the course is the time, but that is only because I am in a different time zone and I am not a night owl.* –An MA TESOL Student

> *This is not a criticism of the course or of the professor, but I feel like we need to figure out the sound situation when it comes to playing recordings. Sometimes it works fine and sometimes it takes a lot of fuss to work or doesn't work at all. There must be a way to reliably share videos and audio files. I think it would be a help to all of us if we figured out the correct way to share sound recordings over this technology for the sake of this and future courses.* –An MA TESOL Student

A couple of students in the course had made notable sacrifice to take the course. The course was originally scheduled to run from 6:00–9:15 in the evening, but before the first class, Naughton was notified that one student had returned home but would still be enrolled in the course. The challenge with this situation was that there would be a six-hour time difference for this student. Another student had a three-hour time difference and joined the class meetings while juggling work responsibilities. The six-hour time difference was ahead, and the three-hour difference was behind. So, with all in agreement, class meeting time was changes to 4:00–7:15 pm EST.

The other recommendation focused on the audio, and Naughton appreciated the attentiveness regarding the need for sound clarity. Time was devoted during class to work out the issues with sound.

A significant point revealed in this survey was how students viewed the teaching of pronunciation as a benefit for them and their future as language teachers:

> *When I was volunteering somewhere this past summer, I was asked to teach a little to some of the permanent workers at the ranch I was staying at. The main topic I was asked to teach was pronunciation, but I had no idea back then how to do it (I also had completed only 2 classes so far). So, I think learning some techniques and background knowledge of pronunciation will help me do this in the future. But as I mentioned earlier, learning this also helps me pronouncing utterances more native-like.* –An MS TEFL Student

> *This course will help me, has already helped me, to be able to quickly learn the pronunciation of unfamiliar words. I hope I will be able use it to help other students in similar ways.* –An MS TEFL Student

In respect to the pros and cons of taking the Pronunciation course remotely, the following responses reveal the themes of accessibility, convenience, limitations, and the lack of in-person learning experiences.

> *The biggest pro for me is that I would not have been able to take the course had it been offered on campus, and that is huge being it was the last class I needed. Another pro for me would be that I was able to see my classmates again, even though we are in two different countries and 3 different states.*
> *I think the biggest con of doing the class remotely is not being able to actually "teach" our lesson plans to our fellow students or to students in the IEP program. I definitely miss that, because I think when you practice teach the lesson, you get a better sense of what would work and what didn't work. Another con I think is the discussion time with your classmates during break or just during class time does not happen as much remotely.* –An MS TEFL Student

> *The most advantage for me is it save the time that on the way to school and I can have more time to relax or do something else. The lack of practice is the most disadvantage of having class remotely.* –An MS TEFL Student

The true act of teaching (in the traditional "in-person" sense) is challenging to achieve remotely. The small conversations and interactions that would occur in the classroom before, after and during class are missing. The fact that an international student was able to return home and be with her family was a positive in this remote learning situation brought about by the corona virus. Nonetheless, the learning experience was different. Student and teacher alike miss being in the classroom and having face to face conversations; sitting in front of a screen for hours can be rather exhausting.

Furthermore, in teaching this course, Naughton discovered how students virtually learned the new language of the International Phonetic Alphabet, successfully designed and implemented pronunciation lessons, practiced how to teach clarified speech through the standard use of stress, intonation, pitch, and ultimately, organized, rehearsed, and produced a dramatic production for pronunciation purposes – all via their computer screens.

Recommendations

The Pronunciation course primarily exercised the synchronous delivery mode for the entire 11 weeks. After teaching the course remotely, Naughton recommends applying both synchronous and asynchronous modes of instruction if possible. Ideally, a blend of the two modes would have been most advantageous in the pronunciation course since the three hours a week of instruction proved to be arduous for both students and teacher. An asynchronous mode of delivery every other week would have provided a break from live video lecture and promoted self-regulated learning.

Naughton also recommends offering students extra opportunities to share their views and ideas in the remote learning environment for the purpose of fostering rapport with the teacher and camaraderie with fellow students. This can be done with implementing purposeful free time, employing the chat feature on RingCentral™ or Zoom™ class meetings, adding discussion board assignment to increase student engagement and topic comprehension, and ultimately employing flexibility and understanding in classroom instruction.

The above recommendations strive to maximize the effectiveness of teaching in an online remote setting. The hope of this article is to provide a growing understanding of how to support online English language teaching instruction in a time of uncertainty and discovery and to show that it is possible to prepare pre-service teachers to teach pronunciation in a remote setting and that the experience can be enriching and empowering.

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Appendix A: Pronunciation Survey

Pronunciation

COURSE SURVEY

Please respond to the following questions in detail. Thank you in advance for your contributions!

1. **What has been the most valuable aspect of this courses for you so far?**

2. **What aspect of this course would you like to know more about? (What would you like to learn that we have not covered yet or that is not listed on the course syllabus?)**

3. **What recommendations would you make for this course?**

4. **How will this course benefit you in your future? Be as specific as possible.**

5. **What have been the pros and cons of taking this course remotely?**

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[*] **Dr. RITA NAUGHTON**, an assistant professor of TESOL, has taught at Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) since 2008. Courses taught in the SNHU Institute for Language Education include Development of Academic Reading, Understanding English Grammar II, Development of Essay Writing, Reading and Writing Techniques, Evaluation and Assessment, and Writing and Research Skills. Her ongoing area of research is Academic Reading and Writing for Second Language Learners, Reading and Writing Strategies, as well as Metacognition and Intercultural Education. Prof. Naughton holds a Ph.D. in Intercultural Education from the Cook School of Intercultural Studies, Biola University, an M.Ed. in Secondary English, Middle School English and English as a Second Language Education from the University of Massachusetts-Lowell, and a B.A. in English and Spanish from the University of Massachusetts-Lowell.