Chapter 11

Reflection

When it Rains it Pours: Homesteading and Learning to Teach During a Pandemic

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It was finals week during my second to last semester in the Master of Education program at Mary Washington. I had stayed up too late again, but the first month of coronavirus quarantine had not been kind to my routine or my sleep schedule. I listened to the rain drumming against my roof and breathed deeply. I was bone tired.

The days of substitute teaching for extra income were over, so most days now found me driving posts, stretching wire, and putting up deer fence at a local winery. I was grateful for the work and the fresh air, but the return to manual labor felt like a setback. I don’t have anything against physical work. I breed goats, garden, and raise chickens. As a thirty-year-old career switcher with a resume full of hazardous gas delivery and warehouse work, I’ve learned a lot about myself and the world around me through labor, but I missed the classroom experience.

I don’t think any single experience has been so educational as substitute teaching: hands-on access to and application of lesson plans written by experienced teachers, real-time classroom management issues with no safety net, and a million conversations with children that showed me how they thought, what they prioritized, and what they feared. I had been scheduled for some really great substitute assignments to finish out the year, too. Now it was back to trading pain for money and listening to podcasts like Cult of Pedagogy (Gonzalez, 2020) while I worked just to stop feeling like I was wasting the time.

It was well past midnight and I had lesson plans to write for one of my final projects before the end of the semester, so I dragged myself to bed. As I drifted off, I smiled to myself at the thought of early morning coffee, a tapping keyboard, and the beat of the rain. My addiction to the early morning quiet has served me well in teaching so far.

Two hours later I jolted awake at the pained screaming of one of my livestock-guardian dogs. Blood thumped through my skull and my stomach twisted into knots as I rushed to the front door. Panicked yelping mixed with snarls and loud, booming barks outside, drowning out even the rain. I threw open the door and saw my neighbor’s dogs snarling and snapping at Argos, trying to get onto the porch.

Enkidu was lying on the porch behind his brother, covered in mud and blood, trying to stand but failing. The assault on my barely-awake senses was overwhelming, but I waded into the fight.
With a lot of kicking and shouting, I was able to run the neighbor’s dogs off my property. Duck carcasses and feathers littered the ground, the rain poured relentlessly over me, and I wondered if I’d lost any goats. The kids were only a month old. I shuddered at the thought of checking the barn later, but picked Enkidu up and gently slid him into the passenger’s seat of my truck. One thing at a time. He was bad off. I could see muscle through the torn flesh of his leg and he had blood on his head and neck. I slung gravel as I tore out of there on my way to the emergency vet in Richmond almost an hour away.

Calling the emergency vet on the way, I prayed that COVID-19 hadn’t shut them down. They informed me that they were open, but I couldn’t come inside with Enkidu. When I got there, I donned my mask and helped them strap him to a gurney to get him inside. They told me to wait in the parking lot and they’d call me with news. I slumped back into my seat and took an unsteady breath. “I can’t do this anymore,” I told no one. I stared at the sky as it started to turn from black to gray and thought about the sick (goat) kid I’d stayed up all night with last month, trying to get her body temperature up enough that she could take milk. I’d said it when she died. I can’t do this anymore. It had become a mantra.

I thought about my classmates and mentor teachers and how I missed them. I had finally figured out how to network and felt like I soaked up their wisdom every second I was in their presence. The pandemic had sent us all home and we texted occasionally, but it wasn’t the same. I wanted to substitute in my practicum teachers’ schools and visit at the end of the day. I wanted to get to class early and talk to my classmates about what I learned from work that day to solidify the experience in my own mind. I had almost finished my practicum hours requirement for the semester when the schools closed, but I had to finish by watching videos. I appreciated the effort on the part of my professors, but I wanted to be there. I can’t do this anymore.

Pondering the lists I had written of books that I saw students reading for fun, I realized I wouldn’t set foot in another “practice classroom” before my first-year contract began in the fall. I missed people. When I was delivering gases on night shift, I often went days without seeing anyone. I had purposefully made a career change that threw me into the thick of humanity. All day every day, surrounded by the chaotic, broken, beautiful mess that is our species. I loved it. Even on days that started at the school at seven in the morning and ended at the university at ten at night, I had felt alive. I still saw some people working at the winery and I saw my classmates and professors on Zoom calls, but it wasn’t close to the same. I can’t do this anymore.

Pulling out a pen and a notebook, I wrote closer to humanity and circled it. It was a piece of a line from my literature circle book for my Teaching of English course. I had a few books and speeches in mind that I wanted to use to teach the oral communication standards as an excuse to arm kids with the tools to connect more deeply and meaningfully with each other. It was clearer to me now than ever how much we all needed that. I wondered how the students from my most recent practicum were coping. Many had been scared and uncertain when we left for spring break. I had the resilience of someone more than twice their age and even I was feeling it. What would they be like when they came back to school? I can’t do this anymore.

I wrote “If the decision you’ve made has brought you closer to humanity, then you’ve done the right thing” (Mafi, 2019). It was my favorite quote from the book, one of those shut-the-book-and-marvel-for-a-moment quotes that I suspect all authors secretly hope they’re writing. What could I do to bring kids closer to humanity? My brother and I had discussed the possibility of this pandemic getting really out of hand. What if they couldn’t come back to the
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building? Would we teach virtually? How could we connect? My own experience as a student had suffered when we switched to virtual meetings. I was extremely impressed with my professors’ creativity and determination, sending us to breakout rooms to work in small groups and assigning work we could do together virtually. But suddenly I had gone from outspoken and opinionated to shy. Feeling socially hamstrung by the lack of body language and social cues around me, I barely spoke at my first Zoom class meeting. When I did, I sounded stupid and was embarrassed enough to leave my mic turned off most classes after that. I can’t do this anymore.

I wrote down Concept outcomes? Better when we work together… effective communication can be used to empower ourselves/others and build relationships that are fulfilling and beneficial to both parties. I thought about the friends I’d lost when I went back to school. I thought about the way hope for a meaningful future had clashed with fear and desperation as I enrolled in grad school. How many psychologists had talked on my favorite podcasts about how progress ultimately prunes friendships as people who resent your progress drop away? It was one thing to nod sagely when I heard it, but another thing entirely to experience it. And now the new friends I had made at school were far away, quarantined in their own worlds. I texted them to check in and sometimes they thanked me for it and we talked about how we were coping, what we were doing to further our learning, and as always, what we had learned about teaching since we last spoke. Why wasn’t that enough? How could I hang out for an hour on a Zoom call with my friends and still feel like I hadn’t seen them? Would my students feel this way as well? How could I get them to learn if they lost the social aspect of school that I had been taught to utilize in all of my classes? I can’t do this anymore.

I wrote down Knowledge outcomes? Respect and authenticity as communication tools… tailoring speech/writing to the audience. I thought about the elation I had felt when I delivered my first practicum lesson. I remembered my mentor teacher saying, “I have no doubt that you have found your calling.” It was a graffiti model lesson on Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Mountaintop speech. I had divided the speech into eight parts and posted them on giant posters around the library. The students moved from poster to poster in groups of three, discussing what their classmates had already pointed out and working hard to come up with fresh perspectives. Some even drew pictures to go with the speech. I still have one on my fridge. I had moved from group to group, questioning, encouraging, and prodding. It was everything I had wished my own high school experience had been: social, hands on, challenging. How would lessons like this look if the pandemic continued? I can’t do this anymore.

I wrote some of my favorite lesson plans while in the parking lot of the emergency vet, sick with worry while they worked on one of my livestock guardians. Because the truth is, it was just another day homesteading. I’ve had a hundred like it. If I let a hard day at home stop me from doing my schoolwork, I’d have flunked out my first semester. I wrote some more of my very favorite lesson plans on the couch with Enkidu later. They gave him methadone and it took him a few days to find his feet again, so I wrote, I carried him outside to use the bathroom, I carried him back in, and I wrote some more. And all the while I thought, I can’t do this anymore.

Much of the hours long wait was spent in that parking lot and the subsequent days caring for Enkidu reflecting on what had helped me build my own resilience (which was proving to be just barely enough) and how I could pass that on to my students, especially as it looked increasingly likely that my first-year teaching would at least be partially virtual. I wondered if I could distill the teachings of people like Carl Jung, Jocko Willink, Marcus Aurelius, and Mark Manson into something accessible for middle schoolers. I started to feel hopeful, productive. I abandoned my mantra.
Lessons on persuasive speech and debate that used speeches by passionate motivators like Eric Thomas and Inky Johnson (they don’t swear, which is a bonus) alongside classics like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Charlie Chaplin were created. I decided I would use these speakers to demonstrate and discuss the frustratingly minimal oral communication standards like nonverbal communication, active listening, and tactful dissent. I hoped I could make time for the real lessons in their speeches: we’re all a part of something bigger, there is reason to hope in dark times, the world is what we make it.

My professors pivoted mid-semester to teaching online with creativity and tenacity. They smoothly expanded lectures to fill gaps in discussion left by students like me who were feeling disoriented by learning on a Zoom call. I watched UMW put together a brilliant free course about the science, history, and cultural impacts of pandemics in a matter of weeks. This course would ultimately inspire me to put together virtual field trips to various museums to remind my students that they’re a part of something.

In October, we went on a virtual tour of the Edgar Allen Poe Museum in Richmond, Virginia. I had students who had turned nothing in all semester suddenly glued to their screens and asking questions of their tour guide, who not only performed poetry for them, but gave them a quick lesson on how to memorize presentations when they asked how he did it. I’m currently organizing a virtual trip to the Dickens Museum in London and if it goes well, I intend to include it in my curriculum even after things return to normal.

Our virtual and then hybrid learning schedule didn’t give us nearly as much time to teach as we would have in a normal year, so we have had to pare down many lessons to just the essentials. When it became apparent that oral communication was on the “if we have enough time” list, I started Wednesday Workshop to teach my “Closer to Humanity” lessons. Since our school is closed for sanitizing on Wednesdays, I offer extra credit to anyone who shows up in my virtual classroom to start their day analyzing motivational speeches. Most of them are meant to be taught through graffiti, jigsaw, fishbowl, and other hands-on, social methods, but it has still been a pretty big hit. I have students with perfect grades in my class showing up just to be a part of it. Better than that, there are students that I have been struggling to reach, who now show up and engage. One in particular never came to class for the entire first quarter until he wandered into a Wednesday Workshop out of curiosity (or boredom, I didn’t ask) and he hasn’t missed a class since.

My practicum mentor teacher sent me home with an armful of books and materials when the schools shut down and has checked in regularly since despite her own workload. When I was hired (via Zoom interview at a virtual job fair), she started gathering materials she had saved for my grade level so that I’d never run out of resources. In turn, she was so excited by the success of my virtual Poe field trip, she’s organizing one herself.

I’m watching teachers old enough to be considered heightened risk choosing to return to their classrooms when they could just retire. Everywhere I look, educators are setting their jaws and thriving in the most uncertain circumstances any of us have faced, determined to serve their students and each other. I’m amazed at their instinct to support each other. I’ve worked a lot of jobs before I found this one, but never before have I seen this level of cohesion.

We can do this.
References

https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/pod