

Zooming into a New Normal: One teacher's reflection on educating from afar



I love teaching. I love the time I spend every August getting my class together, from hanging the bulletin board paper and borders for my walls, to decorating my desk and wall with the mementos students have left me each year. It feels like Christmas when I'm going through my department's inventory of novels, unpacking all of my school supplies. I honestly still get that thrill when I go school supply shopping! And then there's the thrill about a week before classes start when I get my roster. The list of students who are now *my* students. The students who will groan over the homework I assign, who will undoubtedly laugh when I try, and fail, to reach the top of my SmartBoard, students who will message me "Thank you!" after receiving a grade on an essay ... who will then of course be told by me that I don't give grades, I just tally the score of their hard work. Those five minutes between classes where I set myself at the door so I can not only greet my kids coming into my room, but also to shout encouraging (and admittedly nerdy) phrases in the hall. From "T.G.I.M. Thank God it's Monday!" to song parodies about summer reading, you can't walk by Mrs. McLoud's room on your way to class without hearing some type of shenanigans. I work all year to ensure that my classroom is a safe place not only to learning, but where my students can express themselves and grow into amazing adults. My colleagues and I work to ensure that same feeling of safety runs throughout our building. We feel it as adults, and more importantly, our students feel it.

This has been my day-to-day life since becoming a teacher — until Friday, March 13, when Governor Gina Raimondo announced school buildings would be closed for two weeks.

Besides the mad rush my colleagues and I handled distributing Chromebooks to every student who needed one, the shift of education felt different. This wasn't the school department handing down a directive. This wasn't even the commissioner who has taken over my district. This was the government telling us our school buildings were no longer safe. Our safe havens for our students, the place where

we converge to learn and grow, was going to be empty for the foreseeable future. Well empty except for the custodial staff who deserve a standing ovation for sanitizing every inch of the building, and administration tying up loose ends and ensuring each last student receives technology.

As part of the governor's executive order, April vacation was moved to the week of March 16. At the time, I naively thought we'd be back by our regularly scheduled April vacation, which is what I believe most of us thought. Instead of the family vacation we planned touring NYC and Philly, my vacation quickly filled with meetings, setting up two classrooms in my house — one for my son and one for myself — research and planning. It was filled with calls from fellow teachers, nervous about the transition to new tech tools. And yeah, it was filled with anxiety-Netflix-binge-eating, a task I truly feel I could take the gold medal in.

My classroom went from the nerdy *Star Wars*, *Dr. Who* and *Harry Potter* memorabilia-filled room 304 to my "She Shed" — my enclosed porch that isn't quite yet a sunroom, complete with space heater that, of course, broke the first day of online classes. Luckily my students are well accustomed to using Google Classroom to hand in essays or to take reading comprehension assessments, but prior to March I had only used Zoom for after school meetings or professional development sessions. The thought of using that tool for my students never crossed my mind. And mind you, I'm not anti technology. In fact I went to school online (shout out to SNHU) and the ability to do so was literally life changing for me.

So what does teaching look like now?

My classes are now filled with tiny Brady Bunch-esque boxes as we Zoom for direct instruction. My seniors were about to begin watching *Hamlet*, but now we do it over Zoom together. My juniors were in the middle of Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, which we now read and discuss over Zoom. Instead of marking a student absent if they're not in class, if I don't see that a student has either joined my Zoom meeting or handed in any work, I'll shoot out a text. And then a text to their parents. Then an email. If I don't get in touch with the family, the message goes up to my administration who then spends time tracking down the few students we haven't heard from. Contrary to popular belief, our students are showing up. And they're working.

I no longer stand at the door of my classroom, rather I wait for the tell tale "ding dong" of a student entering the virtual waiting room on Zoom. In lieu of singing summer reading parodies, I'm making iMovie trailers about virtual learning that always have the same message: "I'm proud of you; you rock." Instead of having drama club meetings in the auditorium or my classroom, we meet virtually on Zoom to watch local performances together. (Taking suggestions! Please send them my way!) Because *Shakespeare in the City* can't go on, we're trying to think of some way to virtually celebrate the Bard.

Prior to March 13, students complained to me that we scheduled Senior Seminar presentations the day before the prom. Now students admit they were looking forward to their fieldwork and presenting it. I no longer scarf down a lunch under 30 minutes, with students filtering in to watch a movie while they eat their lunch, I now have a two-hour mid-day break where I can make lunch, catch up on grading, even laundry some days. And as productive as a two-hour break is, I would exchange it in a flash for those days where lunch was wolfed down behind my desk.

I'm not callous. I fully understand how absolutely wonderful it is that I'm still able to work, that I'm still able to connect in some way with my students. And some students have really flourished with online learning. If you have to juggle helping your family while working and going to school, having a little freedom with handing in assignments is freeing. I'm literally receiving work around the clock from some

students. In addition, if you're a shy student, having the keyboard in front of you is a liberating tool. And I feel that the distance has even made me closer with some colleagues. We're not together, but we have daily whole school check-ins, we check in on one another more.

But this isn't how I wanted this school year to end, or any school year to end. We are in the middle of a pandemic and as an educator, I have had to explain to students that the school building isn't safe right now because there is something out there that if brought home could severely impact their loved ones, possibly kill them. It's a traumatic experience for them. And if you don't believe this is traumatic for young people, you are grossly mistaken. The late night work that is handed in, the late night texts all tell me otherwise. Are my students successfully handling virtual learning? For the majority of them, absolutely. Are there students who aren't holding up their end of the bargain? Yes. But then again that's the norm when working with students. Some give their all, and some count the days until the next break.

And this is particularly hard on our graduating seniors. They've put so much time and work into their education, and now they don't know if those rites of passage will happen for them. And if I'm being totally honest here, the class of 2020 has always had a special spot in my heart. When this class was in the eighth grade and made the transition to high school, I made it with them moving from 8th grade ELA to 9th grade ELA. Yes, some of my seniors have had me as their ELA teacher in 8th grade, 10th grade, senior year. I have literally witnessed the Class of 2020 growing up in front of my eyes. And now I'm watching them have to grow up a little faster than other graduating classes have had to.

I love teaching, and I am grateful I'm able to continue in these times, but I can't wait for the day I'm back where I belong; outside my classroom door ready to welcome my students in.