

Chapter 5

Reflections of Teaching Narratives

ABSTRACT

This narrative describes the experiences of a high school English teacher who uses innovative teaching methods to adapt to online teaching during the recent pandemic. Students relied on writing to reflect on their emotional health and found comfort in relating to works of literature. The creative projects and motivational strategies discussed can apply to anyone looking to cope with difficult times, find more motivation to achieve a goal, or practice self-compassion when confronted with unexpected events.

TRANSFORMATIVE TEACHING

Like my colleagues across the country and around the world, I found my teaching career transformed by the closure of schools and the move to online teaching in the era of the coronavirus. The online teaching experience called for renovation and exploration. This narrative represents my reflection on my past teaching methods and how I used creativity and innovation to promote future success for my students.

TEACHING AND TECHNOLOGY

Change takes courage. Most people live their lives never leaving their comfort zones. Johnson (2005) observes, “teaching superbly is like running a marathon by yourself in the dark. Few people even notice what you’re doing, and those who notice don’t pay much attention – but their oblivion doesn’t slow you down. You still enjoy the thrill and satisfaction of finishing the race, and you are definitely a winner” (p. 5). But education doesn’t have to be each teacher alone in a classroom, especially with technology that makes collaboration only an email away. Teachers tend to stay in their own classrooms; every once in a while they might venture down the hall to have a conversation with a colleague, but then they lock themselves back in the world behind their classroom doors. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) believe that teachers “come to know their own practices from their work with colleagues” (p. 209). New ideas occur

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when people venture outside their own practices and share their thoughts with others. Romano (2004) believes, “our own voices can take on strength and energy through other voices” (p. 96). My morning conversations with colleagues energized me and helped save my sanity as I prepared to put on my mask each morning during the pandemic and teach behind plexiglass.

I began my high school English teaching career in a school with a tremendous amount of energy, but not a significant amount of resources. My classroom contained a chalkboard, an old television and VCR, and an overhead projector. I made the best of it. When the overhead projector, named Elmo for the company that manufactured it, broke, I placed colorful leis on it with the note “Elmo is on vacation.” For presentations, I used video clips from old VHS tapes. I wrote notes on transparencies (once Elmo started functioning again) and washed them in the restroom sink to reuse. I waited (sometimes patiently, sometimes not) for one of the four computers in the faculty workroom when I needed to send emails to parents. I returned to the same restroom sink and filled a bucket with water to scrub the chalkboard. But the lack of technology did not interfere with learning. Students loved taking out their journals and putting pen to paper to record their thoughts. This was only about ten years ago.

It frustrates me to think of inequity in school classrooms. The school where I currently teach gives every student and teacher a laptop. Technology enables us to continue teaching during a pandemic, when some students choose to learn at home with online learning, while others attend class in person. I feel grateful to erase the whiteboard in my classroom because I no longer have to clean chalkboards. I also feel grateful because the lack of technology in my first classroom prepared me to become a creative teacher; creativity helps immensely when teaching during a pandemic.

WRITING WITH TECHNOLOGY

When several students in my classes said they could not remember the last time they received a handwritten letter, I designed a class activity where everyone took out a sheet of paper and wrote a note to a friend or family member. Students shared with me stories of reconnecting with family members they hadn’t seen since before the pandemic. Some things, like handwritten letters, never go out of style.

Nevertheless, when I compose my own writing for chapters such as this one, I rarely handwrite anything first. Instead, I love the feeling of my fingers flying across the keyboard and seeing words appear on the screen. As Goldberg (1986) observes, “sometimes, instead of writing in a notebook, you might want to directly type out your thoughts. Writing is physical and is affected by the equipment you use” (p. 6). And a flash drive with writing is easier to carry than a pile of notebooks. Goldberg continues, there is a time and place for both because “I have found that when I am writing something emotional, I must write it the first time directly with hand on paper. Handwriting is more connected to the movement of the heart. Yet, when I tell stories, I go straight to the typewriter” (pp. 6-7). Regardless of whether students use pen and paper or their laptop computers, I want them to write.

Revision becomes easier with a typed draft, since deleting a word makes it disappear without any of the crossed out words or erasing required of handwritten drafts. Kearns (1997) describes, “word-processing programs can help our students be better writers by encouraging students to write before they compose – to brainstorm, plan, select, focus, draft, revise, and publish.” (p. 114). She elaborates, “computers can also reduce writing apprehension. For some students, writing becomes easier to manipulate and motivation becomes higher” (p. 114). Some students see a finished handwritten draft as a work of art not to be disturbed; conversely, technology enables them to save multiple drafts of an essay

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