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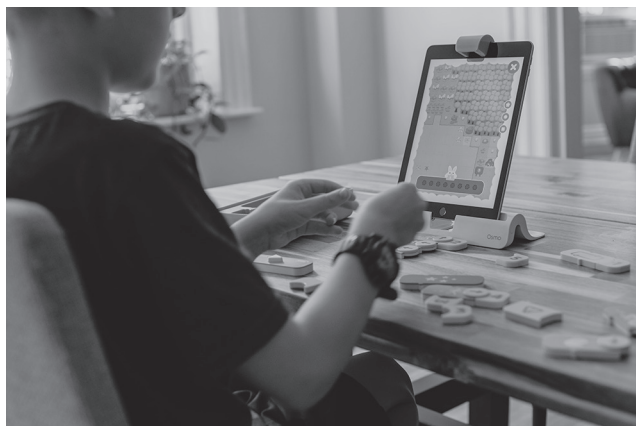
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# Reflections on a Third Year of Teaching

by Chelsea Berg



**Chelsea Berg**

The first year of my teaching career ended with the following advice from the building administrator who had served as my evaluator: “During your first year, you will learn more than your students. In your second year, it might be an equal balance between what you learn and what they learn. By the end of your third year, your students will finally learn more than you.” I feel that there is often a myth that once you exit your teacher preparation program and get your own classroom, things just fall into place.

My first year in the job field was difficult to say the least; finding a position was challenging and then when I did, it was not the right fit. I love learning and value the growth I’ve had as an educator over the last three years in my “right fit” position, but I’ve also been anxiously waiting to see if the advice I had been given proved true. To hopefully have found my teaching “groove.”

If this year had ended normally, I think it might have. However, the final months of this school year have been anything but normal. Instead of ending my third year in my classroom with my students, the year is ending with me posting assignments online and hosting weekly video calls from the sofa in my makeshift classroom while many of my students struggle to recover from an unprecedented act of nature and infrastructure failure—all things I never imaged facing as a teacher.

Without a doubt, online learning changes the very definition of teaching. It was obvious from the start that relationships with students that were well-established months into the school year needed to start over. Students needed to know that I was still there for them even if it was from afar. I achieved this as best as I could largely through being open to communication. One of my first “official” online learning tasks was a survey checking in with my students. This writing might not have been formal, but it gave me insight on how my students were feeling and what they might have been struggling with. Through this activity I was able to pinpoint which students might need a little extra attention from me to help them get through the unexpected changes. The process involved many hours of sending emails to students who indicated that they needed some help, but I don’t regret any of it. It may not have been in person, but I was able to let students know that I was there for them when they needed me.

Discussions with my colleagues have confirmed that there was almost an immediate shift to focusing on the socio-emotional well-being of students while content took a backseat. According to Zakrzewski (2013), the concept of including socio-emotional learning the classroom is a fairly new concept. In her study published in UC Berkely’s *Greater Good Magazine*, Zakrzewski argues that embracing socio-emotional learning skills is equally important for teachers as it is students. The

COVID-19 pandemic has aided in bringing awareness to this issue. As teachers, we were thrust into an environment where our students needed our help with socio-emotional learning more than ever, but we didn't always feel competent in how to help them and ourselves. Zakrzewski (2013) adds the following about the impact of socio-emotional learning on the classroom environment:

“Educators with SEC also create warm and safe classroom climates, fostered by strong classroom management skills. In these kinds of classrooms, the teacher and students practice respectful communication and problem-solving; transitions from one activity to another run smoothly; and lessons are designed to encourage student engagement and love-of-learning—all of which promote academic achievement and create a positive feedback loop for teachers...”

In my personal teaching experience, I may not feel that I have a complete grasp on incorporating socio-emotional learning into my classroom, but I do feel that I have established a positive classroom environment. All of that hard work was essentially lost when the classroom became a screen filled with tiny boxes. It will be interesting to see how easy it is for me to establish that classroom environment when school resumes given that our face-to-face time with students might be unpredictable.

Since we first left the classroom, I have been encouraging my students to use writing as a way to both document and cope with how they are feeling about what is happening in the world around them. A study in *Healthbeat*, a Harvard University publication, focusing on the work of Dr. James W. Pennebaker, from the University of Texas, Austin, cites that “writing about thoughts and feelings that arise from a traumatic or stressful life experience—called expressive writing—may help some people cope with the emotional fallout of such events.” The unexpected nature of the COVID-19 situation has, without a doubt, caused students to experience an unplanned trauma in their lives. I have not asked to see this writing, and I don't know if any

students are doing it. There is so much value in asking students to write about events that may cause trauma in their lives, but it is not something that can be forced. The Harvard study also argues that this type of writing is not for everyone and that individuals who had existing mental health struggles might benefit from writing about their experiences. I hope my students took advantage of the opportunity, but I will never truly know and I am okay with that. It feels odd, as a teacher, to admit that I am okay with not knowing if my students are doing something that I asked them to, but with emotional well-being at the forefront I knew I couldn't force them to write about what might upset them and those that did write might not have felt comfortable sharing their feelings. The Harvard *Healthbeat* study does suggest that when students write privately about trauma it can aid them in opening up to in-person communication; the study states that “writing [potentially] leads indirectly to reaching out for social support that can aid healing.”

Informal, ungraded writing has benefits beyond aiding students in coping with trauma they might be experiencing. Because of that, I plan on making an effort to incorporate more informal writing in my classroom in the future. Information from the Eberly Center at Carnegie Mellon University states:

“Informal writing assignments can reduce the tension students associate with writing, help them get their ideas down on paper clearly, increase their confidence, and eventually pave the way for more formal writing assignments. It may even convince reluctant writers that they like writing after all.”

One assignment that I used during online learning that received positive feedback from students was a “Fun Friday” Writing Prompt. These prompts included questions ranging from the best advice a student had received to what five people they would invite to dinner and what they would make them. These assignments always had strong participation levels and, as the teacher, it was fun to read the responses. I always posted my own response with the prompt and through the process I feel that my students and I had the

opportunity to learn new things about each other even though we were apart. This activity is something that I will bring into my classroom, in-person or online, for the upcoming school year.

I stressed the importance of recording their thoughts in writing, but I have also known that it is important for me to use my own writing to reflect on what I'm feeling. However, I've found it difficult to sit down and put my thoughts about the COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning on paper. The work of Dr. Pennebaker in *Healthbeat* suggests the timing of trauma-based writing does matter. If done too soon, he argues that it can actually make the writer feel worse. It has taken sixty-nine days, slightly out of the one to two-month timeframe suggested by Dr. Pennebaker, for me to feel the pull to write down my thoughts and feelings. My desire to share my thoughts was not generated by a moment of great realization, rather it was prompted by my school community of Midland, Michigan facing another unprecedented event. When the Wixom and Sanford Lake dams breached, the course of distance learning changed again. In the end, my motivation to write about my experience with online learning was generated by additional trauma facing my students.

Sixty-eight days after I walked out of my classroom anticipating a return in three weeks, I watched the news following the failure of the Wixom Lake dam and wondering what would happen in Sanford. As a teacher it is habit to want to help your students however you can, but this was a time I didn't know how. As the town of Sanford was forced to evacuate, I received a phone call from one of my graduating seniors. I was able to talk to her for a little bit while her family was trying to make a game plan. I felt guilty that I couldn't help more, but I know I was able to help just by taking time to talk to her. The day after the dam breached, I sat in my living room watching drone videos and looking at photos of flood waters surrounding my school. As a teacher at Herbert Henry Dow High School, it was not immediately known if water made was actually in the school. What I did know was Thousands of students in our district who were already struggling to adapt to online learning were now potentially displaced temporarily

or permanently as a result of the historic flooding. In the end, our school building was lucky. Our newly remodeled library and several surrounding classes were affected, but easily fixable. The same can't be said for the homes directly around the school. Homes directly across the street have been condemned and will be demolished. It will take years for all of the damage to be repaired, but I hope that I was able to support my students in the best way I could from a distance. For a second time, the emotional well-being of students and their families became the focus of my attention.

Did I get the result I was hoping for at the end of my third year? Simply put, no. Have my students learned a lot this year? Absolutely. They learned from me in the classroom, but they have also had the unique opportunity to learn outside the walls of the school. They've had a crash course in adapting, resiliency, and bravery that none of them ever expected. My students still learned content, but they also learned how to be self-motivated, how to put themselves first and ask for help when they need it, and how a community can come together in amazing ways to bounce back from a tragic event. I'm so proud as their teacher to have had the opportunity to see many of my students embrace distance learning and thrive. I've also had to watch many of them struggling while I wasn't able to help them as easily as I could in person. The truth of the matter is, I will likely never know how my students fared because of online learning. I will not teach the same students next year, so I will personally be unable to help them move forward for the impact of this year. It is frustrating, but the messiness and uncertainty of the conclusion of the 2019-2020 school year was out of everyone's control. I have confidence that as a school community, we will all be able to band together in the fall to ensure that students who struggle during online learning can regain their footing and students who thrived in the online setting are able to incorporate that into a more traditional classroom environment.

The main part of the advice my evaluator gave me that was proven wrong was that my students would finally learn more than me in year three. My students have learned, but I've done an awful lot of learning that I

never imagined. I've learned how to adapt my lessons to online formats with minimal time and training, I've learned how to teach with my cat walking all over me, and I've almost learned how to get a good angle on the webcam. But, in all seriousness, I have also learned to reevaluate what the most important part of teaching is. The content I am assigned to teach will always be important, but this time away from the traditional classroom has only emphasized the importance of creating and placing value on connecting with students. In the classroom, students will only learn if they feel respected and valued by their teacher and I think that is even more important in a successful distance learning environment. Even when I return to the "normal" classroom, I will never take for granted the importance of being conscious of students' emotional wellbeing.

On a personal level, the most valuable thing that this unprecedented time has taught me is that I love what I do even more than I already thought. One doesn't realize how much a job they love defines their identity until it is torn away. I miss seeing my students in person and I miss my classroom, which is like my second home. I miss actually seeing the moments of realization on my students' faces when they "get" something, and I miss the silly off-topic conversations in the hallway. Frankly, I miss everything about being a "normal"

classroom teacher and I will never take another day in my classroom for granted (even the most "Monday" of Mondays). What I've learned during this time will stick with me for the rest of my career. It will take time to grieve what was lost at the end of this school year, but I know that the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the historic flooding in Midland County have changed me for the better.

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## Author Biography

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