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Teaching Responsively during Covid-19: Learning How to Model, Modeling How to Learn

Lindsay M. Keazer

ABSTRACT

A teacher educator describes learning to teach responsively through the Covid-19 pandemic; shifting focus from secretly struggling to manage the upset of work/life balance, to living out the challenges in community with her students. By sharing struggles transparently rather than concealing, she found opportunities to connect with students about the complex challenges they were facing. This process was one of learning how to model empathetic education, and simultaneously modeling to future teachers how to learn to enact responsive pedagogies through unexpected challenges in teaching.

Keywords: Covid-19, empathic education, modeling, teacher education, teacher educator learning

I was outside playing with my kids, when, in a momentary lull, I checked my work email and read the news that my university would be transitioning all courses to fully online in less than 48 hours due to Covid-19. As I reread the email in disbelief, I could no longer hear the voices of my children. It was March 9. Little did I know that this moment epitomized the home/work balance struggles to follow the next few months.

The pandemic's urgency still seeming distant, I continued to send my two young children to daycare while I frantically learned lecture capture technologies and implemented them recklessly with no time for edits or re-dos. I remember rushing around to gather manipulatives and prepare note outlines for a recorded document camera demonstration of a lesson on circumference and arc length for a geometry course for elementary education majors. I had inadequate time to plan the lesson to my usual standards. I hastily recorded it in a technology-equipped classroom, speaking too quickly with insufficient explanation. Then I rushed off late to an emergency college

meeting. I had no idea that this experience would be indicative of the ensuing struggle with time and the fear that I was not modeling the caliber of lesson quality that I espoused for the future teachers whom I was preparing.

The perceived security of sending my children to daycare quickly ended, and with it my access to the campus office and lecture capture equipment. The subsequent challenge of trying to figure out the means and methods of online lesson delivery was hampered by a teething one-year-old's incessant whining and a four-year-old's craving for quality time and educational stimulation of her own. The blending of home/work life and my acute awareness of delivering sub-par instruction were chronic stressors for me throughout the following months. I had to lower my expectations further. Though I was recording my face to explain concepts every day, time devoted for makeup or showering suddenly became rare.

Everything felt constantly unfinished, far too imperfect. My lessons had gaps and there was content that I hadn't figured out how to transfer to the online learning environment. My PowerPoint voiceovers and math demonstrations felt rushed and inadequate. When with my kids, my focus was distracted and I was continually trying to get them to play independently, rather than embracing the opportunities for quality time. I wasn't sure how many balls I had dropped. Prior to the pandemic, I could balance these two worlds of work and home. But with the loss of the work office space, all balance was lost. At any moment, I feared the students' complaints would start to come in. Would I be found out? I was doing the best I could, yet my best was my worst.

Complaints never came in. The students were strangely silent. A few weeks later, I read news that shook me: a student suicide. While I didn't know the student, this tragedy jolted my attention to considering the challenges of life on the other end of the distance learning experience. I could no longer read my students' facial expressions, to see their unspoken feelings. I had envied their apparent free time, without realizing the far-reaching and damaging effects of the pandemic. It was possible that their quarantine and social distancing experiences were far more traumatic than my own. How were my students experiencing this? What were their struggles? I had no idea. I had been so focused on all the gaps that needed to be filled in my teaching, but I couldn't fill them all. Instead, I realized that I needed to listen. Abruptly, I turned from my problems to theirs. This was a matter of life or death. How could I support my students? I didn't want to hear of a tragedy, and realize, too late, that I could have helped.

I began thinking of how to connect more deeply with my students. From my experiences with narrative inquiry (Clandinin, & Connelly, 2000), I knew the

power that narratives hold to draw people in and connect experiences. I decided to write to my students to share glimpses of my life and my own struggles, and to let them know that I cared about their well-being above all else. The tone of my emails changed. I added pictures and narrative to capture moments of my busy life with two colleagues under five, such as sharing about the 1-year old that just learned to walk (yay!), but who was now running around grabbing all the things that he's not supposed to have. (I lost track of how many times I found him holding his sister's scissors – at least they were kid-safe ones, but still!) I asked questions about their experiences in quarantine, such as “What is it like in your home?” And, most of all, I assured them that their health and well-being were far more important than math or course deadlines, that I hoped they were each safe and feeling connected to a community, and that I wanted them to reach out to me if they ever needed to talk. And finally, I shared how whenever I missed our togetherness on campus, I replayed a video sent out by the president showcasing the pieced-together voices of students and administration singing “Three Little Birds” from their different homes (Sacred Heart University, 2020 April 3). It was a good reminder of how our togetherness and synergy could cross the distance.

Suddenly, students responded. I heard from a number of them who were struggling with big and small battles, both internal and external— beyond what I could have anticipated. They appreciated the open invitation to share about their own life. They accepted that I cared, and that I too was human. Surprisingly, they were not upset at my sub-par instruction. They had enough of their own consuming worries. They felt a sense of relief in knowing that they could tell me about their struggles, and that I was listening. I felt relieved by their understanding of my own challenges. I responded to individual emails. I tried to follow up on them again later. The challenges of the pandemic were providing me opportunities to deepen my practice as an empathetic educator.

From then on, I developed a protocol that anytime I needed to contact a student, or anytime a student contacted me, I would begin with, “How are you doing, really? What is going on at your home lately?” Most of the time, I would receive a response. They would share a tiny narrative about their current life, allowing me to learn more about my students and how they were experiencing the trauma. These conversations, albeit over email, allowed us to share our lives during a pandemic, to understand each other better, and to feel connected despite the distance. It allowed me to understand who was struggling, and who needed frequent check ins and other forms of support. I heard from students who were struggling with Covid-19, and from some whose entire families had contracted the virus and had family members hospitalized. I heard from students who lost grandparents, from students

whose parents were working on the front lines, and from a student who bravely decided to go work on the frontlines. Some students were quarantined with supportive relationships, others were quarantined with strained or challenging relationships.

In lieu of my final class meeting, I held an asynchronous discussion to facilitate reflection on “What can *you* learn about teaching and learning during a pandemic?” What could future elementary teachers learn from this experience that might inform their teaching should this happen again when they are teachers? I asked this for their benefit, but they surprised me, and taught me all the more about being a compassionate educator, with the beautiful lessons that they shared.

What did *I* learn from teaching and learning during a pandemic?

I was learning how to model, and modeling how to learn. I wanted to model for students my own reflective work as I learned through this unprecedented teaching experiment. I’ll end with an excerpt from my reflection that I shared with students:

Most importantly, I learned the importance of listening and not assuming. I learned to ask everyone what life was like in their home, and keep asking. From listening to my students’ stories, as much as they would offer, I learned how differently this pandemic was affecting all of our lives. The pandemic is affecting people’s mental health in drastic ways, and we should probably all declare ourselves in a state of grief regardless of our circumstances, and begin the self-care needed (Brooks, 2020 April). Finally, I learned that you can learn a lot about people by seeing how they respond in hard times. I’m happy to be here with you in this course, learning alongside you! (Online learning discussion post, April 25, 2020)

Learning how to model, modeling how to learn. This is my reinvented practice as an empathetic educator.

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About the Author:

Dr. Lindsay Keazer is an Assistant Professor of Teacher Education at Sacred Heart University, teaching mathematics methods and content courses to future teachers. Her research focuses on supporting teachers in developing culturally responsive pedagogies and inquiry based-methods for teaching mathematics.