



Kaleidoscope

Educator Voices and Perspectives

KALEIDOSCOPE

EDUCATOR VOICES AND PERSPECTIVES

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If you are interested in writing, or already have a piece in mind, contact **kaleidoscope@knowlesteachers.org** at any time for feedback, information, or guidance. Every submission, from idea to fully-developed piece, is assigned a peer advisor to help develop, build, and edit the piece before submission.

On our webpage, **www.knowlesteachers.org/kaleidoscope**, you can find other resources to help you develop your ideas, including

- a non-exhaustive list of the genres of stories we publish, including examples of pieces from *Kaleidoscope* and elsewhere;
- the rubric used for the final review of submissions; and
- past issues of *Kaleidoscope* to see what others have shared.

We look forward to learning your story!

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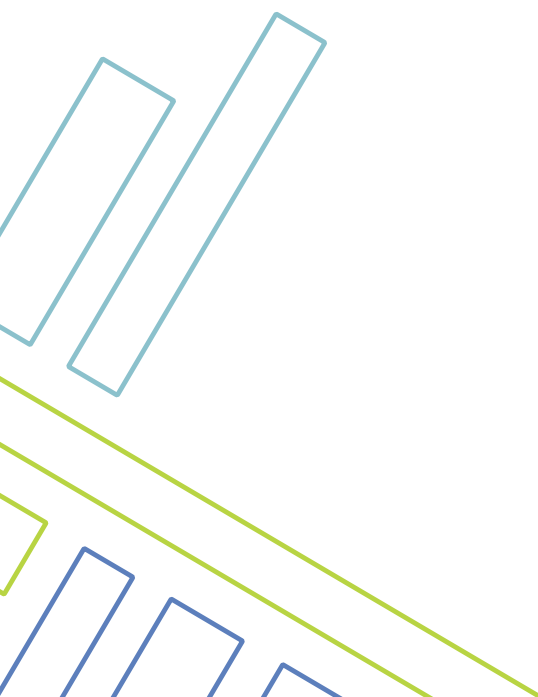
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Disclaimer

The opinions and beliefs expressed in the journal reflect authors' perspectives and may not represent those of the *Kaleidoscope* editorial staff or the Knowles Teacher Initiative.

From the Editors' Desk:

What have we learned from teaching through a pandemic that we want to hold on to?



The *Kaleidoscope* staff offers you this gift—a self-authored issue of the things we learned while teaching through a pandemic.

What a year! As we return to the classroom this fall, there are many things to be grateful for and many things to mourn. As the *Kaleidoscope* staff navigated this year as classroom teachers, we realized that we needed to turn inward to support each other and lean on the community we had built. Now was not the time for new projects or for bringing others in; it was a time for drawing on our relationships for the strength to cope with an impossibly difficult year.

So we asked ourselves: what if we wrote this issue ourselves? It could be a way to give something back to our community, who have given us their time, insights, and wisdom through sharing so many stories with us.

So here it is, our offering to you, authored by current members of the *Kaleidoscope* editorial staff, our peer advisors, and members of our writing retreat community.

Rebecca Van Tassell
Editor-in-Chief



Rebecca Van Tassell, a Knowles Senior Fellow, is an editor-in-chief of *Kaleidoscope*. Reach Becky at rebecca.vantassell@knowlesteachers.org.



less than | Page 17

- Rick Barlow

What happens when we teach students they are “less than?” Rick describes the lasting impact of having been tracked in math as an elementary student and how he’s worked to keep that from happening in his own classroom.

Unexpected Achievements: Teaching English Language Learners in a Remote Environment | Page 32

- Ian Caldwell with Elizabeth Rocks

Ian shares what he learned about trust and curiosity in the classroom through working closely with an ELL specialist in his remote geometry class.

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Erin explores how s have been more pr important in the pa punctuation and wa

What is a good day of distance learning?

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Brenda describes t experiences that co good day of remote These glimpses int school has looked many students and throughout the par simultaneously ha hopeful.

The Teacher I Want to Grow Up | Page 1

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Chris shows us wh learn from and how always learning, ev decades in the clas



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- Erin Oakley

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**Teaching in a Pandemic:
Conversations with Teachers
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- Michelle Vanhala

Michelle reached out to other teachers in her network that offered new perspectives on challenges and ideas for what we do not want to go back to.

**Recognizing Joy in 2020
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- Carlee Madis

Carlee, in verse, tells us the ways she has found joy in the midst of the pandemic.

**Where Do We Go From Here?
Page 5**

- Christopher Anderson

Using a comic, Chris tells us the story of grappling with the impossibility of teaching his typical curriculum virtually and how he had to prioritize what was most important for his students to learn.

**The Case for Resubmissions:
Building a Values-Driven
Assessment System in your
Classroom | Page 31**

- Kirstin Milks

Kirstin narrates us through the way she uses resubmission, showing us how this policy allows her to realize her values about school in her classroom.

**The Power of Compassionate
Leadership: Interviewing
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Page 39**

- Brittany Franckowiak

Brittany describes the importance of leadership in adapting to difficult situations, particularly leadership that listens carefully and models compassion at every level.

**The Builder
Analogy:
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a Pandemic
Page 20**

- Sarah Berger

Sarah uses the analogy of constructing a living space for her 'tenants' (students) to illustrate the difficulties of teaching in a pandemic.

Citation

Van Tassell, R. (2021). From the editors' desk: What have we learned from teaching through a pandemic that we want to hold on to? *Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*, 8(1), 1–2.



Call and Response:

What did teaching during the pandemic teach you?

This issue, we asked teachers in the Knowles community: What did teaching during the pandemic teach you? What's something you don't want to go back to? Here is what they had to say!

I know it sounds daunting to be all subject-area-content all the time, but I used to depend on being an engaging and passionate teacher for the culture of my classroom to thrive. This year, I made sure to have a fun check-in question or activity for students to do as soon as they walked into my room or entered the Google Meet. I got more than the usual level of participation with the “fun” content in class activities. I also found more students talking about the activities and engaging with each other more. I hope to continue to do this in my future years of teaching.

Something I do not want to go back to is a larger classroom size. In order to keep things somewhat safe, school administration limited the number of students that were allowed to be in the building and in the classroom. In a normal year, I could have anywhere between 36 and 38 students in a class; this year, the largest number of students I have had in the classroom is 18! Although I love the life and excitement that comes with a large class, there were a lot of positives to smaller class sizes: grading was faster, I could provide more one-on-one attention, and I could check in with every student in an hour without missing anyone or feeling rushed. I'm hoping my school will realize the importance of class size and try to honor that again in the future.

Anthony Tedaldi, Senior Fellow

In my seat observing teachers and students during the pandemic, I saw how much our students appreciated the intentional moments to check in with each other and their teachers, and continue to build community. What I don't look forward to is the idea that our students are now at a learning “deficit.” It creates a narrative that will further harm our students who have demonstrated amazing resilience. I hope they return to schools that honor their courage and perseverance and strive to move forward from where they are, not where they “should be.”

Camden Hanzlick-Burton, Senior Fellow

“

Although I love the life and excitement that comes with a large class, there are a lot of positives to smaller class sizes.”



I hope [students] return to schools that honor their courage and perseverance and strive to move forward from where they are, not where they 'should be.'"

I recognized two things as really important during the pandemic. First was the importance of normalcy and routine. Every day pre-March 2020, I swung into my classroom from the hallway as the bell rang and said "Good morning wonderful people, welcome back to biology and happy [day of the week]!" I didn't realize how grounding that was for students until five different kids emailed me after my first video lesson to tell me how glad they were to hear me start with that same greeting even though everything else was different.

The second and more important thing was the importance of connection. I've taught primarily in-person this year, and the moments that carry me through the day rarely have anything to do with my content. So I've been working on making more time to tell jokes, share sketches and pictures, and do the silly things that build the culture and the community. This way no one has to feel alone, even just for a brief moment.

Jamie Melton, Senior Fellow

An ongoing feature in Kaleidoscope, Call and Response features short responses to a writing prompt. Do you have an idea for a storytelling prompt? Contact us at kaleidoscope@knowlesteachers.org.

Citation

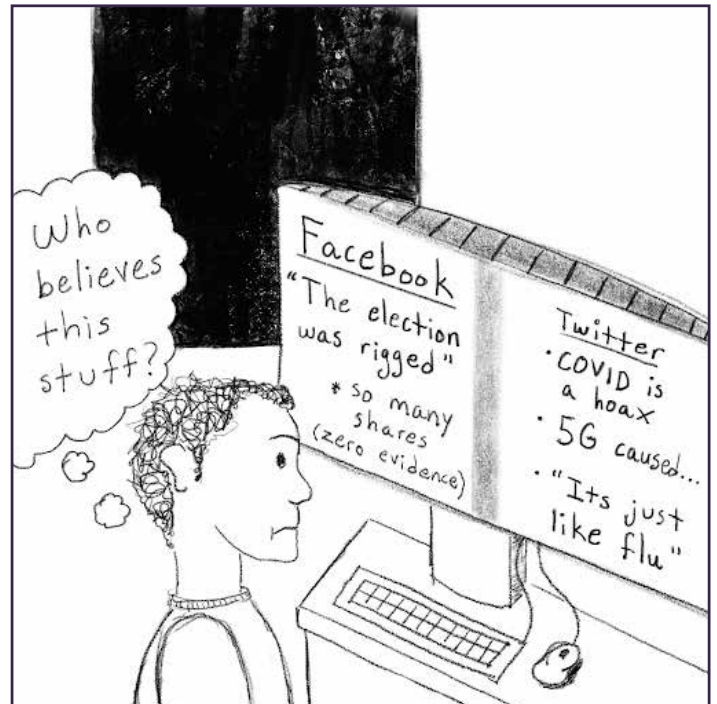
Tedaldi, A., Hanzlick-Burton, C., & Melton, J. (2021). Call and response: What did teaching during the pandemic teach you? *Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*, 8(1), 3–4.

Where Do We Go From Here?

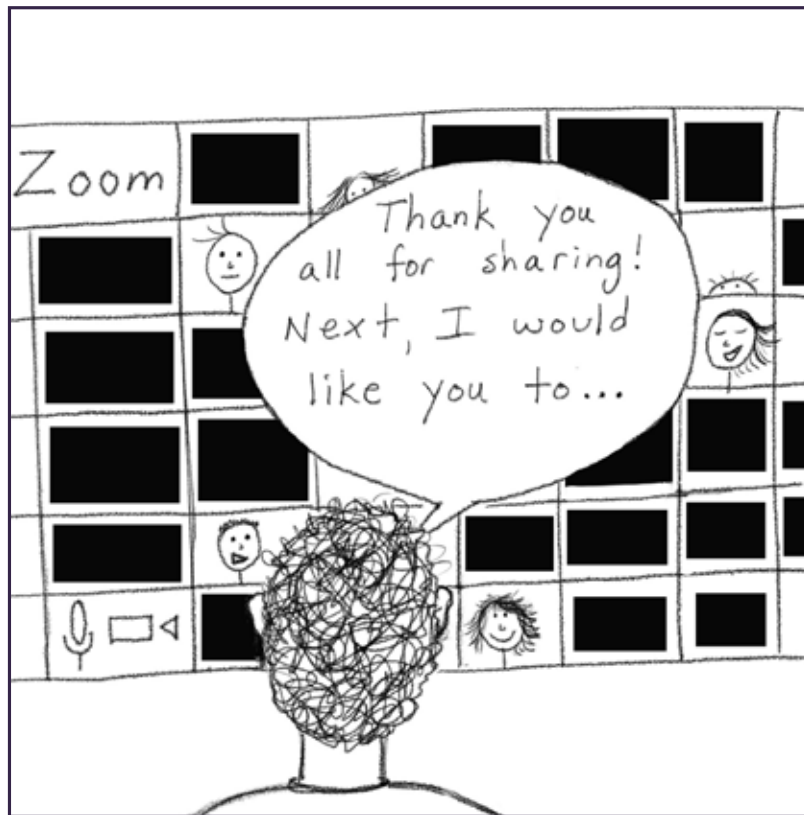
A Comic by Chris Anderson



Trying to figure out how, and what, to teach in a pandemic.

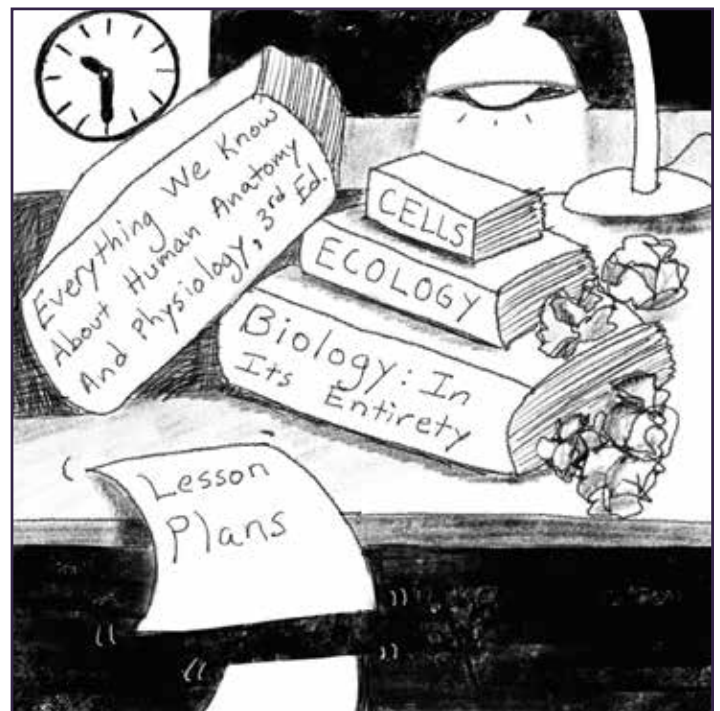
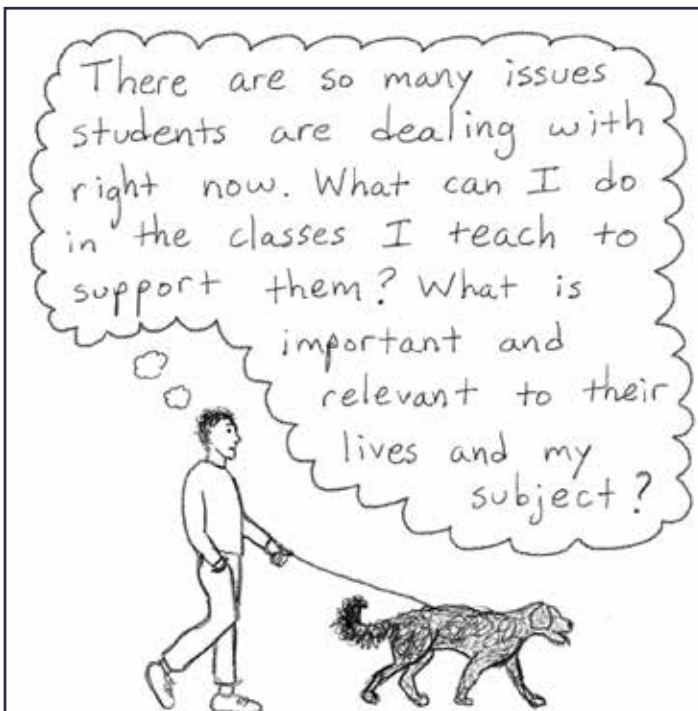


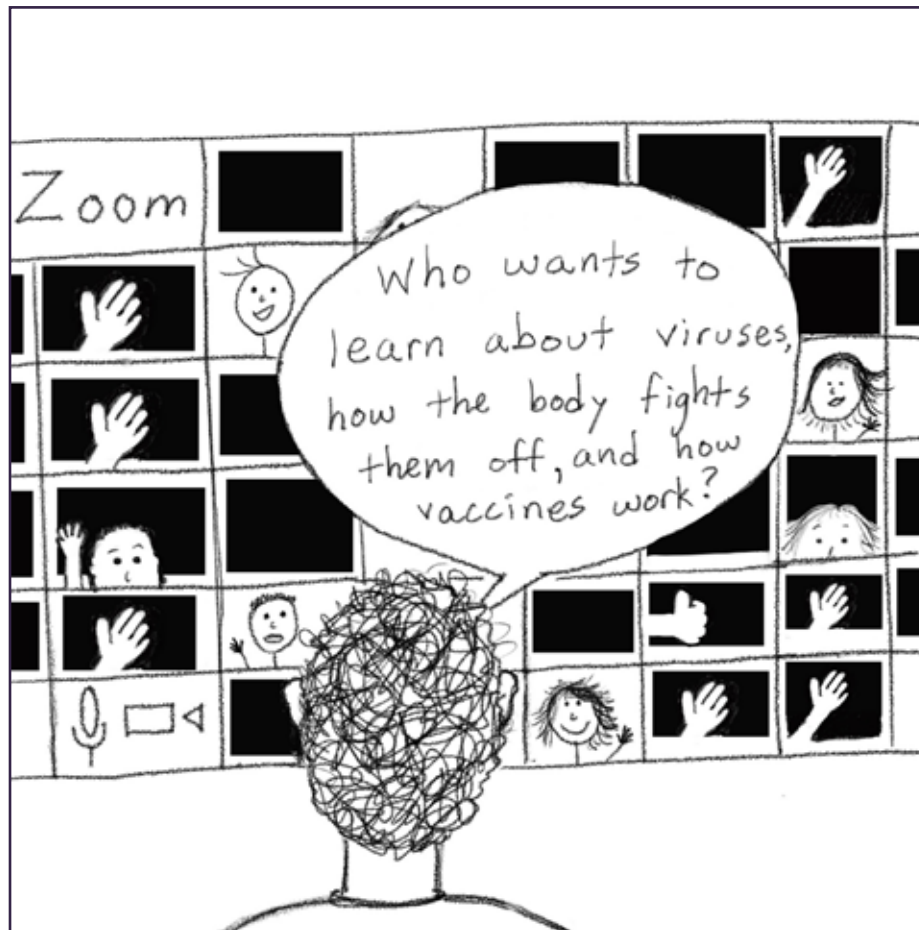
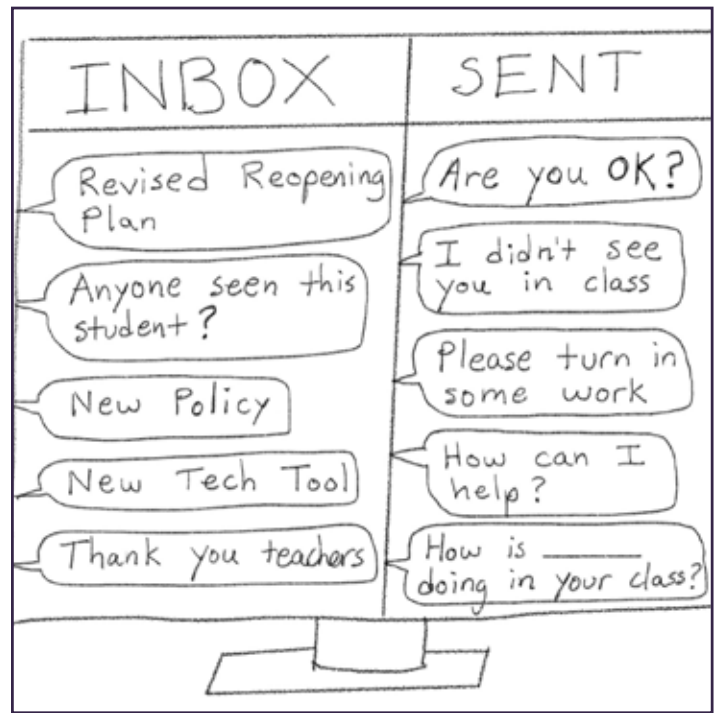


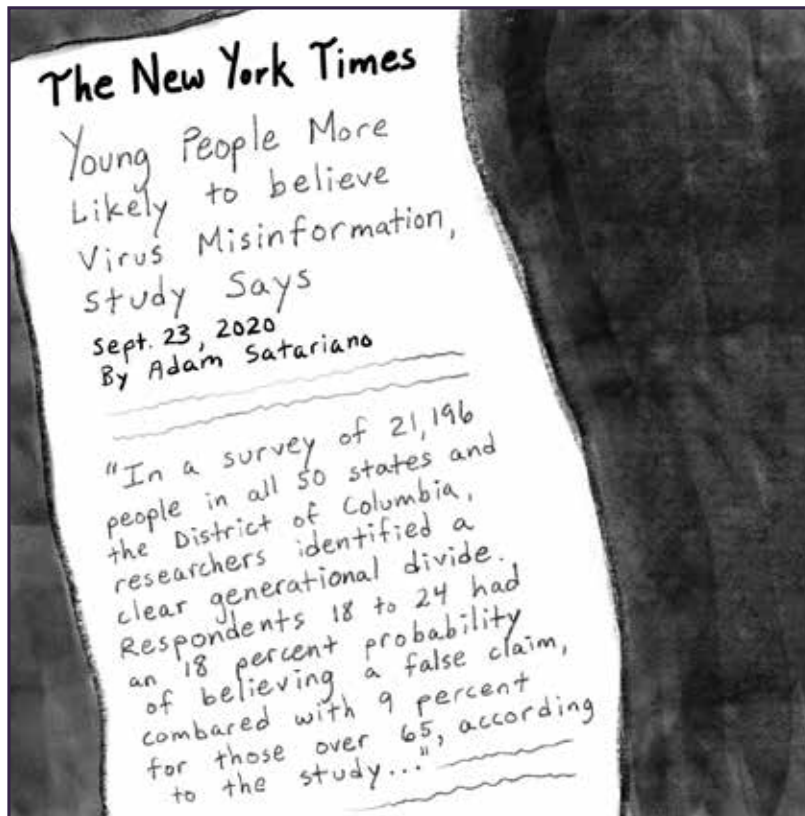




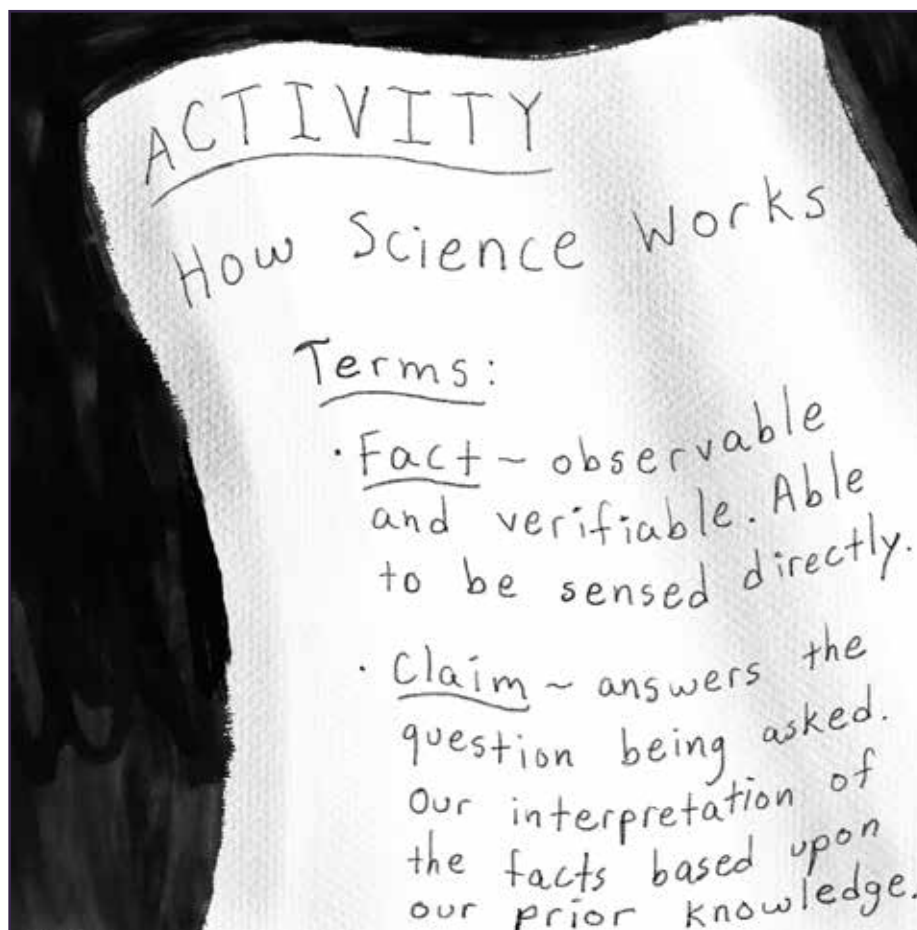
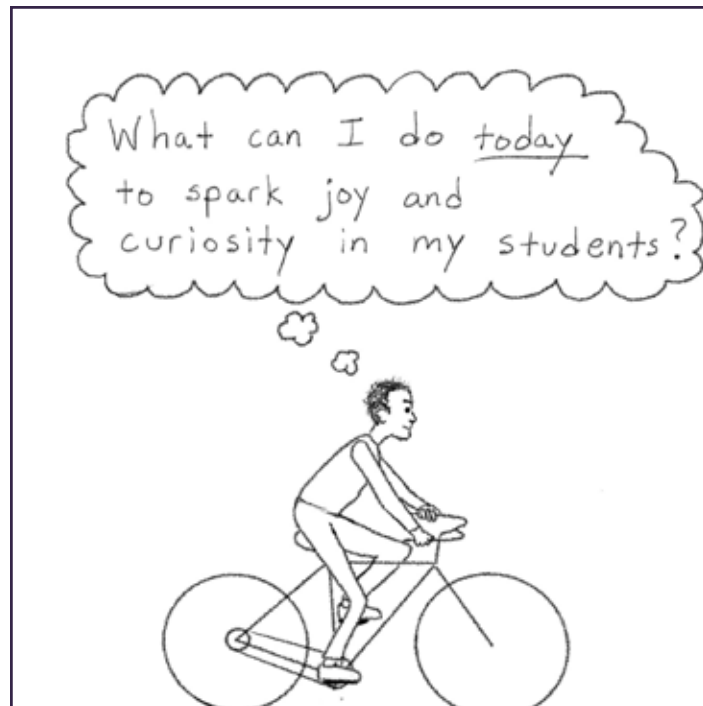
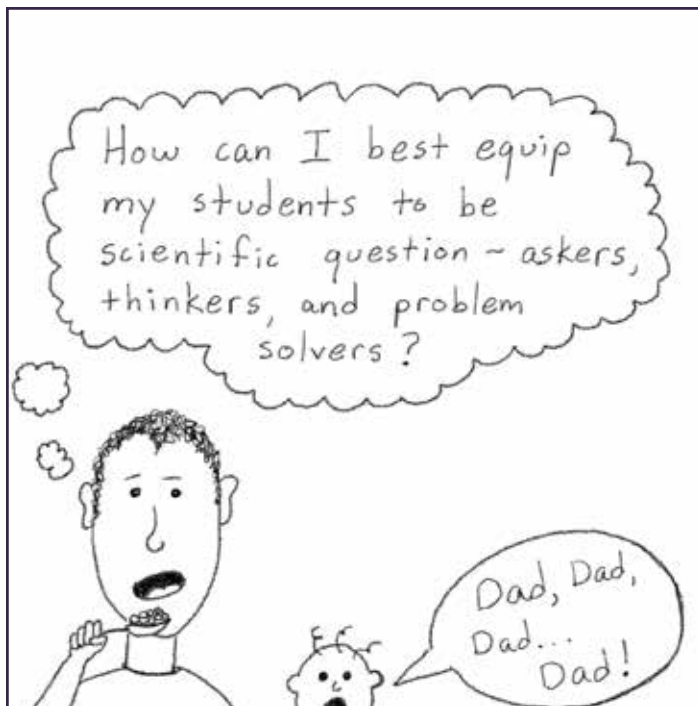
| Student Survey Results |
|---|
| "We like that you take time to get to know us." |
| "We are behind the classes taught by other teachers." |
| "This is my favorite class." |
| "Too much time on zoom." |
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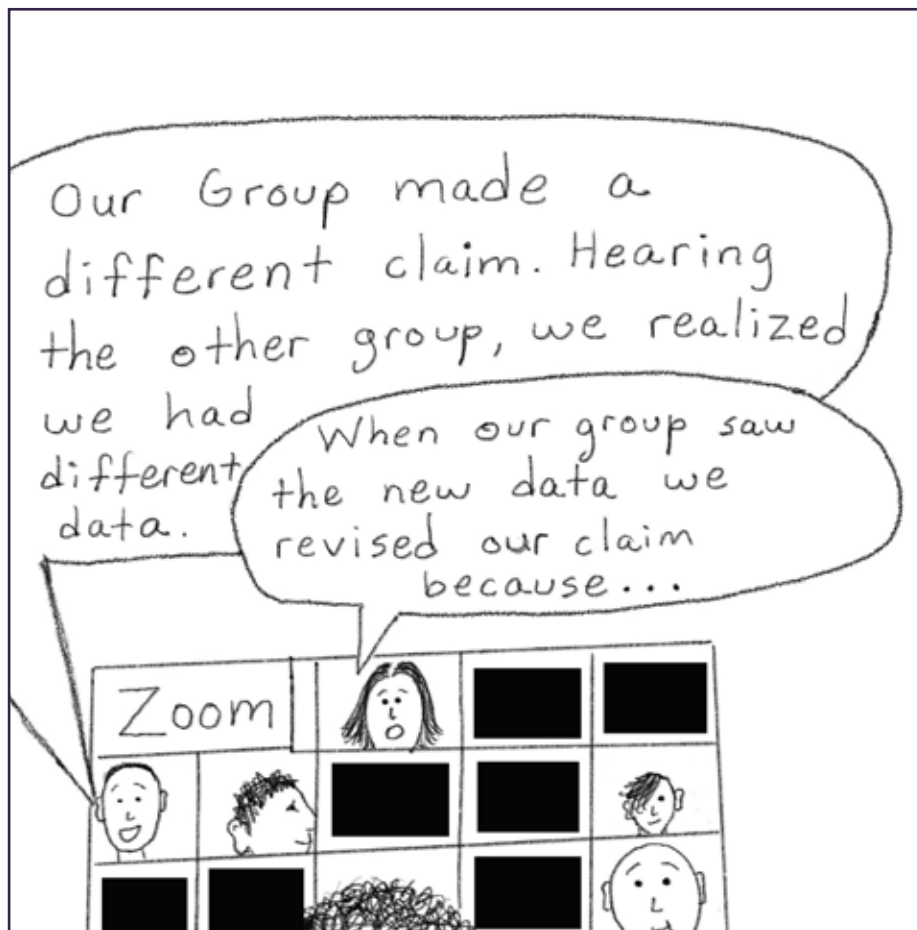
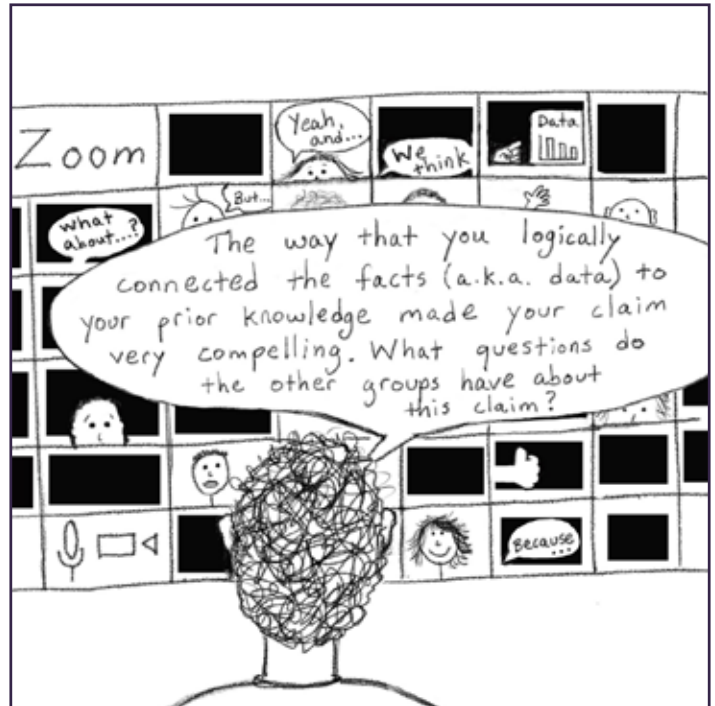


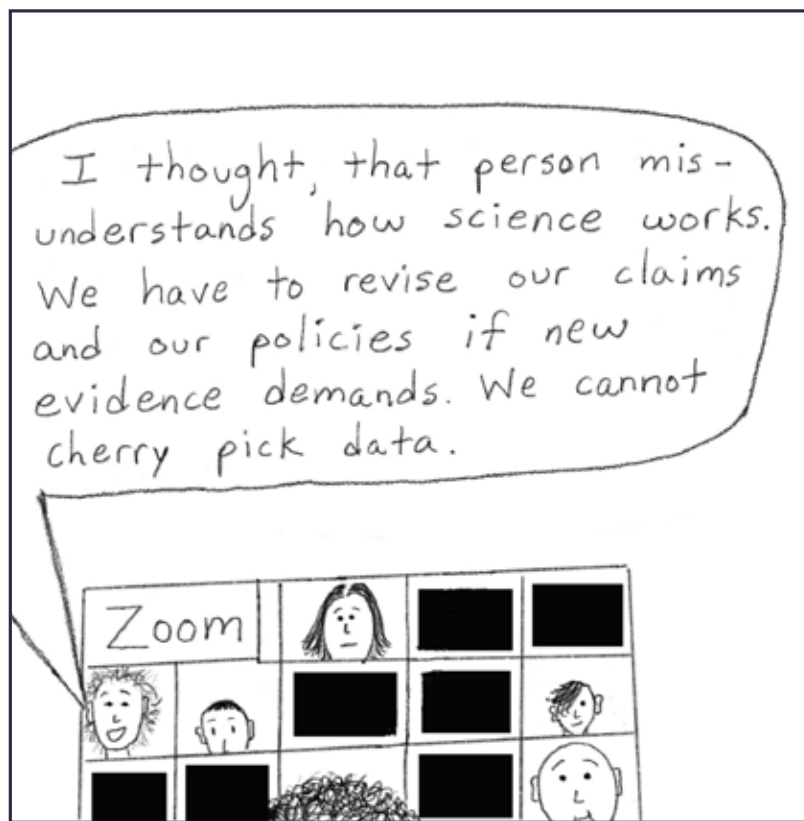
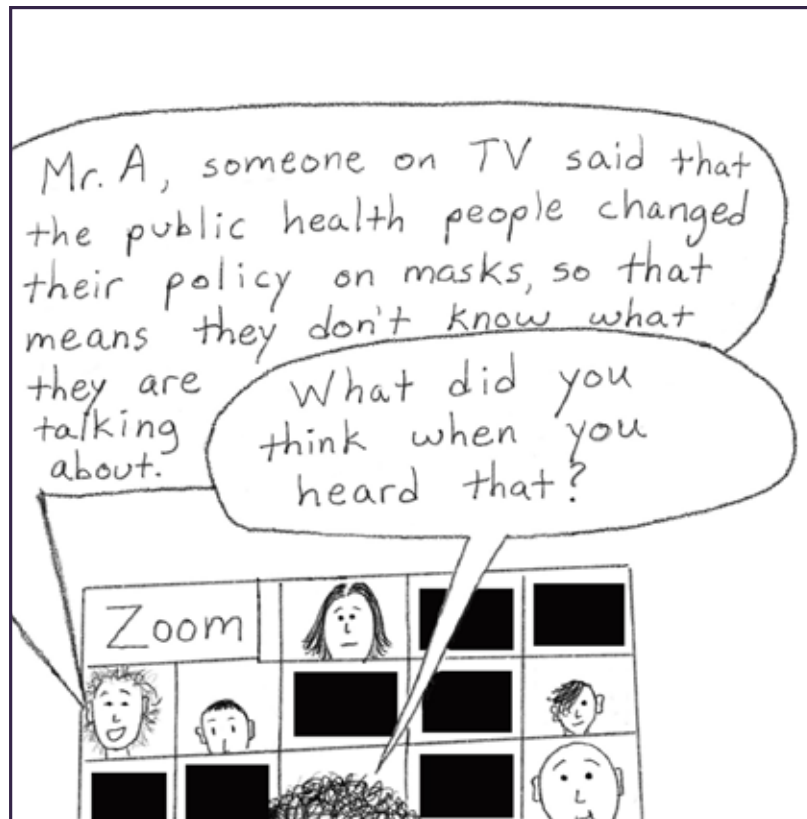




Santariano, 2020









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Satariano, A. (2020, September 23). Young people more likely to believe virus misinformation, study says. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/23/technology/young-people-more-likely-to-believe-virus-misinformation-study-says.html>

Citation

Anderson, C. (2021). Where do we go from here? *Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*, 8(1), 5–16.



Chris Anderson

is a Knowles Senior Fellow who has been teaching at the secondary level for eight years. He has taught integrated science, environmental science, sociology, chemistry, biology, and anatomy-physiology.

Chris recently relocated to the Chicago area, following his spouse, and started at New Trier High School amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. He has lived in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Illinois, but never very far from the Great Lakes. Chris likes to grow things to eat. You can find him, occasionally, on Twitter @grow_sci or email him at chris.anderson@knowlesteachers.org.

less than

Rick Barlow

A teacher reflects on his own experience with educational tracking.

While I don't remember everything about my first day of fourth grade, I remember the smell. Probably from a cleaning solvent that the janitors used over the summer. It's the same smell I'm greeted by as an adult when I return to my classroom each August to prepare for the new school year. To me, it's the first-day-of-school-smell.

I also remember a feeling of excitement and importance. Fourth grade was the highest grade level at my elementary school, and my classmates and I started the year energized. Though, for some of us, that excitement was soon tempered by new challenges.

For me, that new challenge was math class. In previous grades, we were with the same group of students and the same teacher all day, for all subjects. And this was the same in fourth-grade except for math class. Rather than staying with our homeroom teacher, we would have one of the other fourth-grade teachers for math. But we would not move together as a homeroom class. Hence the excitement. We were going to get to mix with the students from the other fourth-grade classes! I'm from a small town and knew most of the other students anyway. But changing teachers during the school day was something exclusive to fourth grade, and that made it exciting.

At some point on that first day during homeroom, each

kid was given the name of their new math teacher. And then we all moved to our newly assigned math classes, a process that must have been total chaos.



Sitting at my desk in my office, I tell myself 10 more minutes and then I have to get back to lesson planning. I set a timer on my phone and start flipping through headlines. I switch to Twitter—the teachers I follow are tweeting about first-week-of-school highs and lows. I sip strong black coffee and go back to reading news headlines. I move a pile of papers on top of another pile of papers. My attempt at feeling productive. The timer goes off.

I check my bank account. Then check email. My 10 more minutes has become 20. The timer long forgotten.



I don't remember much about the math class I was assigned to. But what I do remember seems so clear. My math teacher was stressed. There was another adult in the room. Maybe a student teacher? I never found out. And the class was very full. I had to share a desk with another student. A lot of students had to share desks. I remember the teacher was tall. I don't remember much else about her. I never really got to know her.

Then there was a quiz. I don't remember what was on the quiz. But I do remember I felt like I was on an elevator during that quiz. My stomach sinking as each question reminded me of what I didn't know.

The day after that quiz, everything started out the same. We went to homeroom and later transitioned to math. My math teacher told us that based on the results of the quiz, some students would be moving to a different fourth-grade math class. I was one of the first students whose name she called. I imagine I stood, conspicuous and embarrassed, at the side of the classroom as she called a few other names. The teacher told us which classroom to go for our new math class. And we went.

The new class was less crowded. We didn't have to share desks. I knew some of the kids from my homeroom and some from the bus ride to school. These were the loud kids. The kids that talked back to the teacher; the kids that got into trouble.

No one told me but I knew. Every kid in that room knew without having to be told. The teacher never said it out loud, but she still said it. We were in the dumb kids' math class. I had been a smart kid. And then I took that quiz and I wasn't smart anymore.



My shoulders are tense as I sit at my office desk. I still haven't gotten to lesson planning. I put down my phone and flip through the stack of cards and read my students' comments. Again.

Foundations class is for the dumb kids.

I'm glad I'm in Foundations because I'm not good at math.

I think that the Foundations class is a good fit for me because I am bad at math.

I had just finished my first day of class with my new group of seventh graders. At the end of class, I gave each student a notecard and asked them to tell me how they felt about being placed in the Foundations math class.

“

I had been a smart kid. And then I took that quiz and I wasn't smart anymore."

Foundations class is what my school calls the low math track. And a lot of the responses were what you'd expect from a group of rambunctious 7th graders on the first day of school: "it's fine" or "I don't like homework" or "give us more free time." But then there were the other responses.

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I'm glad I'm in Foundations because I'm not good at math.

I think that the Foundations class is a good fit for me because I am bad at math.

At no point during that first lesson did I tell them they were in the low class. I didn't mention the other math tracks. For the lesson, students completed a group task from Jo Boaler on using a graph to represent different emojis. Each group shared their results with the class. There was a productive class discussion about the work. And, as an exit ticket, I asked them what they thought about being placed in the Foundations class.

Foundations class is for the dumb kids.

I'm glad I'm in Foundations because I'm not good at math.

I think that the Foundations class is a good fit for me because I am bad at math.

Their words reminded me of my own experience in the low math track. Something I hadn't thought about for a long time. Actually, I don't think I've ever really thought about it. But now, sitting at my desk, distracted and anxious, the memory is overpowering. I smell the first-day-of-school smell. I feel the elevator feeling in my stomach. I hear the teacher explaining that some students will have to change math classes. The hot shame of public failure flashes across my face.



Having been placed into the low class in fourth grade put me on a track. In fifth grade I was also in the remedial class. And sixth grade. And seventh and eighth grade. And the track continued into high school where I was placed into a remedial math class that took a year to cover the first semester of freshman algebra. We learned half as much as the other students. In 10th grade, I took the other half of freshman algebra. Every year after the fourth grade seemed to only remind me that I was less than.

Around this time, I developed an interest in science, especially chemistry. I remember wanting to take Chemistry 2, which was considered an advanced class, when I was in 10th grade. But I couldn't because I didn't

have the math prerequisites. No one asked about my interest or what I wanted to learn. I was only told that I couldn't take the class I was most interested in. I was again reminded that I was less than.



Sitting at my desk, reading my own students' comments, thinking about my past and my present, I sigh.

My first fourth-grade math teacher, the one with the over-crowded room, was tasked with an impossible task that most teachers face: teach too many students with a broad range of skills. Her intent wasn't to label me as less than the other students; her intent was to have fewer (but probably still too many) students who were closer together in skill level. There is nothing wrong with a teacher wanting that. As a teacher, I want that! My fourth-grade math teacher didn't give that quiz with the intention of producing a feeling of less than. She wanted to figure out which kids needed more support.

But this is where the good intentions of my fourth-grade teacher, and of many teachers, have a real impact. Instead of learning current, fourth-grade math topics, I spent a large part of my time relearning topics from third-grade math. Which is why the next year, before I was even given the opportunity to learn fifth-grade math, I was already designated as behind. I was never learning the concepts needed to prepare me for the next grade level. For me, and a lot of other students in remedial classes, a consequence of more support is less learning.

Now, as a teacher, I understand that more support shouldn't mean less learning. And this has become my passion. I teach students that have been designated as needing math support. But I believe my students must still be given the opportunity to learn non-routine, challenging math. They must be given complex math problems that they will struggle with—problems they likely won't get correct. They must see that math is more than just problems on worksheets to solve and check. And they must also get support through smaller class size, a focus on essential skills, and (yes) some targeted reteaching of skills from prior math classes.

But the change must be more than structural. In fourth grade, I was labeled as behind in math. A label that followed me into adulthood and shaped my identity. And so, more than just change my lessons, I need to challenge the process used to label students.

When I ask a student to improve their work on an assessment, rather than just giving them a low grade, I am challenging the process used to label students. When I give my students messy, real-life math to work



When I ask a student to improve their work on an assessment, rather than just giving them a low grade, I am challenging the process used to label students. When I give my students messy, real-life math to work on, math with no right answer, I am challenging the label."

on, math with no right answer, I am challenging the label.

My students are not naive. Just like I knew, they know what being in the "Foundations" math class means. And while I can't change the system, I have the power to see the student behind the label. And to give students opportunities to be more than what that label affords them. An affirmation that, no matter what that quiz told me, no matter how I felt every year after fourth grade, I am no longer less than. I never really was.

Citation

Barlow, R. (2021). Less than. *Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*, 8(1), 17–19.



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The Builder Analogy: Teaching During a Pandemic

Sarah Berger

Trying to describe what teaching has become during a pandemic definitely requires a literary device.

"Oh, you're a teacher? How's that going this year?"

Teaching is notoriously difficult to describe, even in the best of times. It's hard to balance the joy and satisfaction I often feel with the very real and unique challenges that can make the job feel anywhere from appropriately taxing to soul-crushing and undoable.

Trying to describe what that job has become during a pandemic? Well, I'm not even sure it's possible, but it will definitely require the usage of a literary device.

To paint you a picture, let's imagine teachers are builders. Their job is to spend each year building apartment buildings whose foundations and frames are made up of a rigorous curriculum, a healthy classroom culture and meaningful connections with members of the community. These buildings are custom made by each builder to best serve their unique tenants, the students.

I am a proud builder. Like many builders, I have spent years honing my craft. There are many factors to consider, and I constantly make mistakes. Frankly, I'm not sure it's even possible to make an apartment building that is best suited to the needs of all my tenants with the resources available to me and to them. That said, I know that I've made a lot of progress creating apartment

buildings that are, for the most part, comfortable, welcoming, accessible, and affordable. My apartments are generally well received, and each year I'm a little prouder of the final product.

This year, someone burned all my blueprints, stole all my power tools, and switched out all the building materials that I was used to using. Standing there with a cheap hammer and some questionable-looking plywood, I was told, "Sorry this happened, but we're all counting on you to make your apartment building this year just as good as what we've grown used to."

There may have been some tears.

“

When you're forced into a situation that necessitates making a lot of random choices just to see what happens, you pay attention to your craft in a different way."

But I'm a gosh darn builder. All I know how to do is build. So I have been building. Everything takes longer, works less well, and is substantially less satisfying. I am constantly worried about my tenants because they too have new and complex challenges and I have fewer tools than ever to help them. It constantly feels like there is a long line of people walking past my build site, muttering under their breath: "Wow, this neighborhood has really gone downhill. The apartments used to be so much better."

I am tired. Bone tired.

But when you're forced into a situation that necessitates making a lot of random choices just to see what happens, you pay attention to your craft in a different way. So what have I gained from this massive, horrible DIY project?

I look much more carefully at the work being done by other builders.

Before this year, I've always had a pretty well-fleshed-out blueprint to fall back on. I knew generally what was expected of me, and I wanted to learn how to use all the tools myself. I knew that other builders could be great resources, and I consulted them from time to time, but I truly believed that no apartment building could be better than the one I built myself. I didn't like to share decision making, and I hated working around someone else's time table. I had a vision and I was, for the most part, unwilling to compromise it. In my mind, really good builders could figure it out on their own.

But I am here to tell you I do not have this new normal figured out. It's a coin flip whether something that I add to the apartment will help my tenants or completely escape their notice. I spend a lot of time wondering if they're even in the building. As a result, I have finally started to really look at what other builders are doing. We are all navigating equally insufficient materials and no one is claiming that what they are creating is perfect, but there is so much to learn from the subtle differences. Instead of dismissing a whole building as "not my style," I am starting to find things I love: great windows, interesting lobbies, better use of space, and more individualized rooms. I am more humble and less critical. I am learning to look at what someone else has created with a more open mind—and the more I do, the more great things I find. I've even started to try some of the fancy architecture I really thought I'd have to scrap this year.

I have a greater appreciation for amenities.

I've always focused on the apartments themselves (in this analogy, my content). That's the whole point, right? The actual living spaces. Surely that's what everyone most



I am here to tell you I do not have this new normal figured out."

cares about and will find the most impressive when I post pictures on Zillow.

This year the actual apartments are all I have and I cannot lie, I have a whole new appreciation for the amenities. I used to resent the landscaping (sports) that took students out of my apartment buildings at odd hours. Now I would give anything for some of my wilting tenants to be able to roll around on the lawn with their friends five hours before they actually need to be there. In the before times, I wasn't quite sure why we were spending so much time sprucing up conference rooms (social events like dances, rallies, spirit weeks, etc.), when only a certain subset of tenants, most of whom were already doing pretty well, really seemed to enjoy meeting in them. Now I would happily watch some of my more enthusiastic tenants wow me with a PowerPoint presentation I only minimally comprehend and feel slightly uncomfortable watching. Old me thought the lobby (lunch and breaks) was just a default feature people had to pass through to get to other things. New and improved me now values what a big difference a quick chat in the lobby can make to a tenant, and to me!

I am more patient with and curious about my tenants.

When my thriving apartment building was burnt down in March 2020, I was given two sticks and a tarp for each of my tenants.

I don't blame anyone for this; no one knew how to handle the new normal and my district was much more reasonable than most. For me, that looked like 100% asynchronous instruction. I had to post weekly assignments, make video tutorials to explain how to do them, and remain "available" during normal school hours for students who had clarifying questions. Turns out no structure is not enough structure for the average teenager. Around 30% of my tenants just disappeared, and I was really worried about how many would be willing to come back this year. I was pleasantly surprised. So

many of them willingly moved in. They brought plants, quirky furniture, and paint. They added their own life and little touches to the space. Some even commented, “I really love this building, thank you for all the hard work you put in to rebuild it.”

Some of my tenants have been a harder sell. They didn't like apartment living in the first place, and the ramshackle structure I had created this year wasn't really changing their mind. Even once they moved in, they occasionally left trash in the hallway or skipped a rent payment (rent = effort). But, at the end of the day, I was grateful to have them and they were grateful to have me.

Then there were tenants who never came. They never crossed the street; heck, some didn't even come back to the neighborhood! I kept asking for advice and adding features that might make the apartment more enticing. I put up billboards, I held open the door, I even offered to pay 90% of their rent if only they would move in! Every time someone emailed me to ask me what I was doing to bring back missing tenants, I gesticulated wildly and replied, “I don't know what else you want me to do; the rent is practically FREE. I have never required less rent.”

It took time for me to lower my defensive barriers. When I did, I looked outside. There were still many potential tenants I had no way of reaching. They matter, and I hope they come back—but by focusing on them, I had missed the two or three who had been sitting on the porch this whole time, occasionally ringing the doorbell, sometimes even stepping into the reception area. They had a lot of reasons for not being ideal tenants and, to be honest, there are a lot of tenants I still don't know how to build for. I'm tired and I've done a lot, but this pandemic won't last forever—I hope that I can keep holding open the door and asking if they would like to come inside.

Citation

Berger, S. (2021). Teaching during a pandemic: The builder analogy. *Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*, 8(1), 20–22.



Sarah Berger,

a Knowles Senior Fellow, is a National Board Certified Teacher who teaches chemistry and AP Chemistry at a large public high school in California. She's done some other stuff in education and is generally considered to be a

"try hard" by those in the know. This year she cut back a lot, but has greatly enjoyed being a peer advisor for *Kaleidoscope*. She hasn't done all that much advising *yet* (growth mindset) but, if you're going to be discerning about who you're willing to Zoom with, you couldn't ask for a greater group. When she's not teaching, she likes to make things pretty, be outside where things are already pretty, or lay very still doing nothing. Reach Sarah at sarah.berger@knowlesteachers.org.

Transfer of Qualities After “Transfer of Qualities” by Martha Ronk

Erin Oakley



What objects are important to us and why?

Thursday, March 12, 2020. I breathe a sigh of relief because tomorrow is the last day before our two-week spring break. While we aren't sure about what this new virus is or if it will reach the Midwest, the chance to step away from school is very much needed. One of the art teachers pops his head into my room.

"Take everything with you; they are closing school tomorrow."

My mind rushes into high gear. What will I need? How long will we be gone? Why do I have so much paper? I grab things indiscriminately—whiteboard markers, students' graded retake quizzes, and even a basket of scratch paper—but I don't know what will be important, because I don't know what's coming.

I'll learn later that the things I'll miss most will be things that couldn't have fit in my bag. And I'll find that new items, new points of attachment, rise to relevance in unexpected ways. In the months that followed that Thursday in March, my students and I had to relearn our symbols for "classroom" and incorporate new objects and habits into our shared understanding of school. We discovered how artifacts held us all in community, appreciating their importance in hindsight, through their absence, or discovering them new, in this unknown space.

Room Seating Numbers

What I miss most is the seating chart. Each Monday when students walked in the door, they were handed a number. Over time, each number has been carefully decorated by the bored hands of ninth graders, but none were ever lost. Students never got tired of making fun of my odd-looking bubble fives.

What I miss most is the mingling. Even though the table numbers never changed, students still needed help finding their seats. It took one student a whole semester to realize the tables were in numerical order. My small room forced them to scoot by each other as they started class.

What I miss most are the introductions. In the beginning,

“

These numbers started off as an impersonal way of getting kids to connect, but they transformed into representing us."

they dreaded getting the number, anxiously looking at me when they were the only boy at the table, or screaming with delight when they ended up with their friends. Each week they had to introduce themselves to their new tablemates. Slowly, they started to meet each other.

What I miss most is the transfer of ownership. I would hand over the number saying, "Welcome, I am so excited to have us learn together. This week will be what you make it." No matter what number they got or who they sat by, they couldn't complain. It's only for a week and we are all here to learn together. Everyone has something to bring to the table.

What I miss most is this symbol of our community. These numbers started off as an impersonal way of getting kids to connect, but they transformed into representing us. As each number was passed out, it transferred the qualities of me to the student, the student to the group, the group to the class, and the class to the content. These paper numbers brought us together.

Teaching in Motion

My desk at home is not a proper height. Or maybe I'm just at my desk for too long. The mental load I carry has manifested itself in my shoulders and neck.

My desk at school was rarely used. I was standing while teaching, kneeling while explaining, pacing while planning a lesson, or maybe sitting in the communal Math Center with students. While I never had a pedometer, I am confident I met the 10,000 step requirement each day. While teaching, I would leap into the air to convey my love of exponent rules, crouch over a student's work to help them find where they wrote $2 + 3 = 6$, and speed walk across the building to use the restroom. If someone asked I would say that I don't use my hands to talk, but that's because I use my whole body. I am known for standing on desks, dropping to the floor, and the famed "High School Musical" jump. You know you're doing something right when a child asks, "How can you be so awake all the time?"

Now I teach while sitting, hunched over my computer grading online assignments, collapsing my shoulders in frustration when I can't teach something effectively, and stare at my screen while I try to figure out a way to contact a student in need. The small airspace visible in a Zoom call does not do me justice. The invisible box presses in on me. I can feel the pressure building inside my muscles, truly grasping the ideal gas laws. There is not room here for my joy.

A New Attention to Punctuation

I once wrote an email with a period and was declared "angry" by a parent, so now I end most of my sentences



The small airspace visible in a Zoom call does not do me justice. The invisible box presses in on me."

with an exclamation point. It's all about finding the right balance. If I use it in every single sentence I come across as young and therefore not smart enough to be a math teacher, but if I don't use it enough I sound mean and accusatory. This wasn't really a problem before except for the occasional parent email, but now I email and leave online comments for my students several times a day.

These written communications are the only ones we have now. What am I conveying? Can they tell what my tone is? Am I too focused on the right answer rather than the process? What is my personality in this sterile environment? Does the little bubble with my face on it remind them that I am a person whom they know? A person they were frustrated with, laughed with, learned with? Can the correct number of "!" convey how I miss them and hope to see them again? I will myself through the keyboard and the screens, hoping the human connection isn't lost.

Creature Comforts

It's not all bad. Here at home I can control my physical environment a bit more. Take a bathroom break when I need it. It's cold in Minnesota, and my hands are freezing, but rather than turn the heat up I find a sweater and brew a cup of tea.

Any kind will do. Jasmine for when I am feeling reflective. I think about how my dad loves this tea and taught me not to steep it too long so it doesn't get bitter. Chai with sugar and milk when I want a bit of sweetness. (Before lockdown, chai occasionally made it to the school building, when my husband would deliver a cup on random afternoons.) Sometimes a long-steeped earl gray, the kind my brother-in-law said

tasted like dirt. Perfect for a mood where I am inclined to cut the crap.

And the mugs! At school, I normally had one math-themed mug, but at home, I can use them all! Buffalo china from my mom for when I want to harken back to olden times and feel the calm that comes with wisdom. My “anxie-tea” mug for when I need a laugh, remembering how my roommate gave it to me after I was panicking. The oversized one I found at a thrift store to contain the copious amount of whipped cream I put on hot chocolate and imagine the people who owned it before me. Sometimes I even come back to my trusty math mug, the one my best friend got me for the Christmas when I got her the same one! Great minds do think alike!

As I drink, I imagine the warmth filling my body and radiating outward. I'm grateful. This moment that would never have been afforded me at school is now my solace, my grounding, and my hand warmer.

Notes

My dog is barking wildly in the background of my meeting. I turn off my mic and yell at him. Only then do I realize I forgot to turn off my camera too, and my students are giggling at my frustration. I am filled with annoyance, embarrassment, but also hope. The mail has come. And while it could be junk mail, or a catalog (seriously, who signed me up for these catalogs?), it could also be a letter.

Despite being a millennial, I have always loved to write letters. My now-husband and I wrote weekly letters to each other throughout college, I always write a thank you note in response to cards I get, and I maintain several other correspondences with family and friends. With the pandemic, it seems that people are starting to rediscover the gratification of letter writing.

Children seem to understand this joy inherently. They pass notes to each other, they doodle in their agendas, and they are much more likely to write a note to me rather than tell me something. On our last day of school before closing, one of my students wrote me a note. I keep it on my desk at home as a way to remember that we make a difference.

Ms. Oakley, thank you for being a great teacher. You always make funny jokes and you are also willing to help me. Thanks for making me like math!

“Thanks for making me like math.” I'm reminded of our impact on one another. Isolated as we are now, in teaching and learning, this connection is less obvious but it is still there. Students laughed at my “If only

there was a mute button in class!” jokes. We organized birthday drive-bys and even tried to make group pictures using our backgrounds. It's not much, but it's something. I'm proud of the connections we found a way to make during a difficult time, when we felt so far from one another. And I know my new appreciation for the mundane, ordinary objects of a classroom is a part of a deeper understanding I've gained about what school is, and how we make it.



Now it is May. I have made it to the end of the year teaching online, and it turns out that I didn't need any of the items I frantically threw into my car. Other objects, while not needed, were sorely missed. New objects started to define my work space. My students felt it too. These objects have power, and I hope to remind my students with each interaction that even apart we remain connected.

Suggested Reading

Ronk, M. C. (2013). *Transfer of qualities*. Richmond, CA: Omnidawn Publishing.

Citation

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Erin Oakley,

a Knowles Senior Fellow, enjoys engaging in mathematical thought with her students. She has had the privilege of being a teacher at a variety of schools and now serves as a specialist at St. Catherine University

in St. Paul, Minnesota. Reach Erin at erin.oakley@knowlesteachers.org.

Teaching in a Pandemic: Conversations with Teachers around the United States

Edited by Michelle Vanhala



Four teachers from across the U.S. share reflections after a year of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teaching during a pandemic has been, well... unprecedented, to say the least. Kaleidoscope staff member Michelle Vanhala talked with four different teachers from various contexts across the nation to get their take on teaching this past year. Read on to learn about the lows and the highs, the tips and the tricks, and the lessons learned from teaching in the time of coronavirus.

Monique Rivera-Velez teaches earth science at an international school in Maryland.

Here's what she has to say about this year's challenges:

There's been a lot of social-emotional support that was needed. It's really hard for students to learn content when they have other things to worry about. Some of my students had to start working because their parents lost their jobs. Many don't have reliable internet; some aren't able to log in at certain times.

I went to Puerto Rico to visit my family in November, and the internet in Puerto Rico is not the best, so I got to experience firsthand how frustrating it is to have slow internet. The kids were like "Miiiiiss!" And I was like "Yes, I know! How do you guys do this? This is so frustrating! You are so patient; this is so much!" I would have bailed a

long time ago.

The rewards:

I just need to take things one at a time. You do what you can. And I've been telling that to kids over and over again: "It's okay if your internet is not working. It's okay. If you're having trouble, communicate. Let me know how to help you." I'm not giving kids a break, but at the same time I'm being flexible with them. Because we're in the middle of a pandemic. You do what you can.

These kids work with what they have. I don't want to sound cliché, but they are inspiring that way. Because they work really hard, and they make it happen.



These kids work with what they have. I don't want to sound cliché, but they are inspiring that way. Because they work really hard, and they make it happen."

About self-care:

Teachers work a lot. I work really hard at being a teacher and planning lessons. It consumes most of my life. When we went on our first two week closure, I didn't know what to do. I'm not teaching—so who am I? What is life without teaching? I realized that I am more than just a teacher. Life should be more than your job. Teaching is part of who I am, but at the same time it's not all that I am.

I'm not a superhero. At the beginning, I was worried: "What about this, what if this happens? Where are the kids, are they okay?" But worrying was not productive. If I'm not okay, how can I help them? I hope that if they need something they will let me know. I can share resources and make sure they know how to advocate, but I'm not Superwoman. I do what I can. That has brought peace, and I've been able to set that boundary.

What needs to change?

Testing. Just get rid of testing. Testing does not measure what students learned. It just measures how well they can take a test. Get rid of that. Do more project-based learning that actually teaches them skills that they can use in life.

I am really excited about project-based learning. I've realized that learning more about PBL and applying that to my classroom has made this hard time so much better. I look forward to it. I look for the bright side. And hold onto it.

What do you hope to hold on to?

Online learning has made my teaching more accessible. When we go back, it will not truly be going "back." I want to keep the technology skills that I've learned and continue with them even in person. By that point, I will have survived quarantine teaching. I can do anything. I'll be happy to be there, happy I'm with my students, and happy I get to teach.



Lee Ferguson teaches AP and IB Biology in a large suburban school in Texas.

On challenges:

For us, what "hybrid" means is that we have students in person and online simultaneously. It's been very difficult to find anything that's positive about that particular set up. Those of us that teach science courses or arts courses that require hands-on learning components or some sort of performative component to our course, the issue there becomes how to deliver instruction. In my



There's a huge movement in education to make grades disappear because they're meaningless. What is an 85% without feedback, without documentation, without evidence for why you're giving that grade?"

situation, because I have students both in person and online—how do I do that and do it equitably?

The problem with teaching science without a lab is that you lose the wonder. Because the wonder comes from discovery. Honestly—I tell the kids this all the time—to learn science you have to do it. It's an active process.

What was rewarding about this past year?

I had a girl at the beginning of the school year who wanted to drop my class. So we sat down, we chatted, and she let me know what was bothering her. In the end, she decided not to drop the course. In the last week of school, she took the final exam and did really well. She finished the semester with an A, and I wrote her an email. I said, "Hey, I just wanted to let you know that you did really well on your exam. I appreciate all the hard work that you've done, and I'm very proud of you." The next day I got an email back; when she wrote me back, I almost cried. She said, "You have no idea how much that meant to me for you to say that. I am so glad that you are my teacher, and I am so fortunate to have you here to support me. Thank you so much, I am going to work so hard this next semester." I don't care how the rest of the school year goes—if this is the pinnacle then that's fine. It was the best gift I got all semester long. I did my job.

What needs to change?

I'm going to state an unpopular opinion. Grades. They need to go away. There's a huge movement in education to make grades disappear because they're meaningless. What is an 85% without feedback, without

documentation, without evidence for why you're giving that grade? What does it mean to have a 70%? What does it mean to have a 60%? We as a whole system need to look at grades. What is the purpose of a grade? Why are we continuing to measure students like this? It's not fair. It's not equitable. I don't think it's right. That's something that needs to change. If we have learned nothing from this whole experience, then shame on us.

What do you hope to hold on to?

Another unpopular opinion: Online school that's delivered by the local public school system needs to remain as a choice for families. For some students and families, this method of instruction works. Overwhelmingly, the kids who have elected to stay at home for the whole school year say, "This allows me flexibility to work at my own pace." For a lot of kids and a lot of families, this should be an option.

From the teacher perspective, virtual learning gives you the opportunity as an instructor to innovate in ways that you probably couldn't in a traditional classroom. Schools are so locked into the way they do things traditionally that it sometimes gives them tunnel vision. They don't want to look outside of the boundaries that keep them doing things the way they've always done them. Whereas with an online system, teachers have a lot more leeway to design an appropriate curriculum, to design appropriate assessments, to do so much more that they could not do in a traditional classroom setting. Schools should make this an option for families, and I think it should be an option for teachers too.

Any other thoughts to share?

My kids are lucky to be going to school during a historic time for biology. A year ago this pandemic was descending upon the globe for this novel virus for which there was no vaccine. And less than a year later—boom—science was able to come together and say "look, we've got this vaccine!" I think it's really cool that the kids are getting to see that in real time. The convergence of all of these things happening at the same time has been pretty cool, even in the most difficult teaching situation possible.



Rebecca Harwood is a 9th- and 10th-grade English in rural southeastern Michigan.

On challenges:

Student engagement has been a huge challenge. I'll call on kids over Zoom, and I can hear the PlayStation in the background. It's hard to compete with the distractions at home while trying to teach them and engage them in a

virtual classroom.

Another challenge would be dealing with everything going a lot slower virtually. It's been hard realizing that this year is more about socio-emotional learning than it is about the content. I found that when I take the time to have my dog jump up on my lap and we joke around and everyone brings their cat or their dog forward—it makes everyone happy and engaged. We need to put aside the content; it's going to take a while. We might go for longer, but it's important to make kids laugh.

What was rewarding about this past year?

We had just finished reading *The Crucible* and I was trying to decide: do I do an essay? I was worried that an essay just was not going to be engaging—what a boring way to finish such a great unit. I knew I needed to do something that was going to get students working with each other, something more motivating. The solution? A virtual trial. The question was: Should the character Abigail Williams be charged with murder?

I split students into groups: a defense, prosecution, and a jury. Each group had an outline to work on and each person had a role. Attorneys had to work with their witnesses to come up with questions and answers. The jury's job was to come up with a rubric, find evidence, and take notes during trials, and then they had to deliberate and come to a conclusion.

We had two days of trial that were very direct and structured. Students for the first time this year were actually engaged. They were showing up to class right at the start; they were excited to get into their groups. Everytime I jumped into the breakout rooms they were talking, which I never get to hear. They dressed up. They were amazing. My attendance was the highest it's been. It was awesome to see them engage.



Student assessment needs to change. It needs to be more project-based, more competency-based."

What needs to change?

Assessments need to change. Being all virtual, and assessing virtually, I realized that students literally have unlimited resources. They can Google anything. We need to get away from the standard, traditional test: multiple choice, short answer, the same questions that are passed on year after year. Even essays: there are so many resources out there for kids to jumble up essays, to copy and paste them so that they're not technically plagiarized even though they haven't written a word. Student assessment needs to change. It needs to be more project-based, more competency-based; we need to get away from sitting down, taking a test, and as soon as it's turned in, it's done.

What do you hope to hold on to?

I have been more organized this year than I have ever been. I didn't start out that way, but I realized quickly that I needed a system. I have all of my topics arranged by week in Google Classroom now. Putting in the materials and having a retake area and a class materials area for kids to go in and quickly find stuff has been absolutely amazing. It puts so much accountability on the students. It's all there, it's all digital, it's all time-stamped. I'm definitely going to continue to do that moving into the future.



Brenda Minjares teaches physics in a large urban school in southern California.

On challenges:

Over my six years of teaching, I had developed strategies for accessing student thinking by asking them directly



My whole job revolves around being able to work with student ideas and thinking, and I felt like I wasn't able to be effective online in the same ways that I was in person."

and waiting for verbal or nonverbal responses. I just didn't have that access to their thinking when teaching online. My whole job revolves around being able to work with student ideas and thinking, and I felt like I wasn't able to be effective online in the same ways that I was in person. I love the technical aspects of what I do—working with student ideas and discourse. Not having that as something I could use as a strategy was really hard.

On rewards:

My fear was that students would lose interest in school or not see themselves as being successful because of what has happened—because of changes that were made around them, many without their consent or without being transparent.

I had five key values that I had identified that I wanted to keep in mind throughout the school year. These were "compassion," "flexibility," "grace," "relationships," and "keep it simple." These were the things I want to focus on. What was validating was that a lot of students felt very cared for. They highlighted my kindness and the level of understanding that I had with them in their student feedback forms. And that felt validating, because I did not prioritize rigor. Rigor was not on this list of values. Compassion and kindness were my intentions, and I'm glad that I stuck with that, because it added value to their experience in school.

At the end of every virtual class session I told them I loved them. I remember when I decided to do that I felt a little silly and awkward. I do love them, but I wasn't used to telling them. Before I'd dismiss them, I'd say "Okay, if no one's told you yet today, I love you and I care about you all, and I hope you enjoy the rest of your day." As the semester went on, some of them would tell me they loved me too in the chat. Those little things were so rewarding, and made it feel okay. They felt seen, and that was most important to me.

What needs to change?

The way that we onboard new teachers is something that needs to change. If we are trying to redesign school to meet the needs of all students, which is not originally what school was designed to do, we need to give more attention to new teachers and give them a support system.

I also hope we're taking the opportunity as a broader community to continue to have conversations about equitable grading practices, because this pandemic has definitely brought to light a lot of the inequities. It's exacerbated where those gaps are in opportunities to learn and get the quality education that everyone deserves.

What do you hope to hold on to?

We're working with people. On theme with the values I chose this year, I want to hold onto the humanity. I'm holding onto this belief that we're working to change a system that was never designed to do what it is that we're trying to do, which is to meet the needs of all students.

Anything else to share?

I think it's important for me to say that in August I was having serious doubts about returning as a teacher. Which triggered some identity issues—what else am I going to do? I was very seriously considering not being a teacher anymore. Thankfully there have been enough small miracles that I credit to my district, to my union, to myself, and to what I've learned about sustainability and self-care. I feel more assured that I want to stay in this profession. There are a lot of opportunities for me to use this experience and my voice to hopefully affect positive change. I'm hopeful.

Citation

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Rebecca Harwood

teaches 9th- and 10th-grade English at Tecumseh High School in Tecumseh, Michigan. Rebecca strives to incorporate innovative, student-centered teaching and advocates for more student voice in the classroom. Outside of her passion for reading and writing, she enjoys hiking with her two huskies on the beautifully scenic trails Michigan has to offer. Reach Rebecca at rharwood@tps.k12.mi.us.



Michelle Vanhala

teaches ninth-grade environmental science at Washtenaw Technical Middle College in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She is a Knowles Senior Fellow and currently serves as an Associate Editor for Kaleidoscope.

Michelle is passionate about elevating teacher voices, advocating for equitable grading practices, and working with her colleagues to create and implement authentic, interdisciplinary learning experiences. Reach Michelle on Twitter at @MsVanhala or by email at michelle.vanhala@knowlesteachers.org.



Lee Ferguson

is the lead AP/IB Biology teacher at Allen High School in Allen, Texas. An award-winning educator, she has taught all levels of biology throughout her 25-year career and has taught AP and IB Biology for nearly 18 years.

She strives to make her classroom a place where students are free to be themselves, valued and loved as they are, and encouraged and empowered to ask questions and investigate the world around them. Lee has served as an AP Reader since 2006 and has been an AP Consultant since 2016. She also serves as the moderator of the College Board AP Biology Teachers' Online Community and is an HHMI BioInteractive Ambassador. Lee enjoys empowering other educators (regardless of subject area) through building their capacity to lead learning. In her free time, she enjoys cooking, looks forward to traveling again soon, and loves a good book! Reach Lee on Twitter at @thebiospace or by email at mrsleeferg@gmail.com.



Brenda Minjares,

a Knowles Senior Fellow, teaches physics and AP Physics in San Diego County in California. She serves as science department chair and PLC lead, where she pioneers modeling physics for all, Socratic seminars

in science, and standards-based grading. Brenda is a strong advocate for sustainable practices for teachers and recently launched an online brand (The Sustained Teacher, @thesustainedteacher on Instagram) to support new and veteran teachers in developing their own practices for sustaining a career in teaching. Find Brenda on Twitter at @bmminj or at brenda.minjares@knowlesteachers.org.



Monique Rivera-Velez,

a 2018 Knowles Teaching Fellow born and raised in Puerto Rico, teaches at International High School in Langley Park, Maryland. Her fascination with science began with after school activities like visiting

her hometown's bioluminescent bay "Bahia Mosquito" when she was in third grade. These experiences with nature and 4-H summer camps inspired her to become an educator. During Monique's second year of teaching, she discovered project-based learning and never looked back to traditional teaching methods. One of her career dreams is to start a school greenhouse where students can grow their own vegetables and create a student-led market for the Langley Park community. Reach Monique at monique.riveravelez@knowlesteachers.org.

The Case for Resubmissions: Building a Values-Driven Assessment System in your Classroom

Kirstin Milks

Designing revision opportunities that are effective yet sustainable? Start with your values.

In this narrated video, teacher Kirstin Milks talks us through how she has structured her classroom to reflect her values as a teacher. Kirstin realized the assessments she was using with students were causing harm. She was seeing that tests, firm deadlines and no room for error were not aligned with what she knew was true about how learning happens—through feedback and iteration.

“I learned . . . that progress isn’t linear, that feedback matters, and that it’s the ANALYSIS of data that propels learning forward.”

Furthermore, Kirstin walks us through how she went about making this sustainable for her by reflecting on what is important to her as a learner, and as a teacher, and structuring her resubmission policy to highlight those values. Aligning her classroom practices with her values made the sometimes more difficult work of allowing resubmission feel meaningful and important, among the many meaningful and important tasks we accomplish as teachers.

Watch Kirstin’s story on the *Kaleidoscope* website: knowlesteachers.org/kaleidoscope.

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Kirstin Milks,

a Knowles Senior Fellow, learns from and with AP Biology and Earth/space science students at Bloomington High School South in Bloomington, Indiana, where she is also the faculty facilitator of the youth anti-bias action group Community Leadership Building. Find Kirstin on Twitter at @DrMilks or reach her by email at kirstin.milks@knowlesteachers.org.

Unexpected Achievements: Teaching English Language Learners in a Remote Environment

Ian Caldwell with Elizabeth Rocks

The surprising benefits of virtual teaching strategies on the learning of a group of ELL students.

Even when the rug gets swept out from under us, we can sometimes land on our feet.

The pandemic started as I, Ian, was wrapping up my school year in Arizona and planning on moving to Washington state. I got a job at Sehome High School in Bellingham, Washington, to teach mathematics. Our school kept teaching remotely through the fall, so I met my new colleagues and students through the computer screen.

Along with teachers around the world, the new remote learning environment left me feeling like a first-year teacher. The majority of my well-used teaching tools, strategies, and curriculum were not available in this new context. In many ways, I learned how to teach as I taught. One of my greatest resources was Elizabeth Rocks, “Ms. Betsy,” to her students.

Betsy is a volunteer who works with our English language learning (ELL) students. Students move to Bellingham from various locations around the world, such as Eastern Africa, Vietnam, and Latin America. Some of these students have almost no schooling, no knowledge of English, and little or no experience with formal math classes. The ELL department expanded. Our school's most introductory math class is algebra, and some of these students were not prepared to be successful in

that course, so Betsy transitioned to supporting ELL students in mathematics.

Of my five geometry classes, almost all of my ELL students are in one section, with Betsy there to support. Betsy is not an academically trained educator, but her insights were invaluable this year. She helped me see that something special was happening with her ELL students¹, and we want to share her insights with you.

The following is a letter that Betsy wrote to capture what she saw.

In a tiny corner of the Bellingham School District online learning environment of the fall 2020 semester, somewhat remarkable and unexpected achievements were made by a small group of students usually considered most unlikely to succeed in this very difficult learning environment. Though I am under no illusion that the achievements I saw can be easily replicated, as they depend on some unique circumstances, I believe it is worth pointing out some of the successful tools and practices so that more creative minds can perhaps apply them in the future.

I supported ELL students in both Ian's mainstream geometry class and a geometry support class with [another teacher]. That meant two solid hours of back-to-back geometry

¹ Information about students has been de-identified, and all student names are pseudonyms.

every day. Last year, there was some attempt to acquaint these students with their computers, and some use of Desmos [an online calculator and math learning platform], but in general that was left to the end as extra work, usually only after a set of problems was completed. This group never became very familiar with their computers. Because of online learning, of course, the technology piece was no longer optional.

Betsy's experience with and knowledge of these students had a large impact on how I thought about planning curriculum. Considering students' learning needs made me think about which technological resources to use, how to communicate how to use those resources, which concepts would be most accessible to them and which concepts we could build to later, and how to provide motivation to engage and persevere.

The beginning was painfully slow and required superhuman levels of patience, from all of us. Ian relied quite a lot on the use of GeoGebra [an interactive math teaching platform], which I came to see as a very effective teaching tool, not just for geometry, but for language and technology learning as well. A student would share their screen, and I would guide them verbally to plot points and create certain figures on Geogebra.

Total Physical Response (TPR), as first described by James Ascher and introduced to me through Berty Segal Cook's *Teaching English Through Action* (1999), is a language learning technique based on first listening, and then understanding and carrying out commands, similar to the way babies learn their first language(s). Using GeoGebra in this way can be the ultimate TPR lesson. For example, a student sharing her own screen is told to plot a point. This skill had not yet been solidly grasped by this group, even after algebra, but doing it many times every day as a response to a command reinforced this essential skill in a way that paper and pencil never have. Also, since students are sharing, if they make a mistake, others will correct them.

After seeing the benefits of Betsy's work with this group of students, I intentionally made an effort to use TPR techniques with all my students. The process was slow—it would have been much faster to share my screen and just show them—but the benefits were obvious in time. Even though my other students were already fluent in English, they were also learning the languages of technology and geometry.

Following Ian's curriculum, students were then asked to use the GeoGebra tools to, e.g., "make



I was concerned that these students were only learning procedures. Betsy helped me see that our students were learning so much more than math, and that what they were learning was foundationally necessary to make my geometry learning goals accessible."

a perpendicular bisector." In the case of some students, to listen to and carry out such a task required them essentially to translate between four languages, three of them new: their native language, English, technology, and math. The growth of their skill in this area was palpable as the tasks and learning became more complicated. Watching a Zoom screen and listening and talking about a problem required a level of focus that I have not seen in a classroom. In many ways, the communication is much more intimate and the person you are talking to much closer. Once students were able to follow my directions, I asked them to perform the same skills without direction, and then to explain how to make figures and solve problems to the other students while performing their magic with GeoGebra.

Initially, as a math teacher, I was concerned that these students were only learning procedures. Push this button, then that button, then this other button, and you're done! I was concerned about whether they were learning any math. Betsy helped me see that our students were learning so much more than math, and that what they were learning was foundationally necessary to make my geometry learning goals accessible.

The constant repetition of the slippery vocabulary of geometry (polygon, Pythagorean,

perpendicular...), as students used the GeoGebra tools, made the new words stick in a way I have not seen in other classes. Another benefit of following directions on GeoGebra is the requirement of precision. When you plot a point, you must get to the exact intersection of the grid lines. This is a challenge for many students on paper; points and lines tend to be wiggly and uneven at best. Even though the technology is aiding in the plotting precision, seeing our geometric shapes in this very clear, clean way is a powerful aid to students.

GeoGebra allowed students to explore more interesting geometric concepts. Previously, I used technology sparingly because I have seen benefits in students learning the minutiae of plotting and graphing and making decisions about axis scales. Even students' imprecise drawings can drive mathematical conversations and sense-making. But there are benefits in removing the minutiae and focusing on the bigger picture.

Success at this kind of work—"I can build a circumcenter using perpendicular bisectors!"—began to empower these students. When they could follow all the steps, and then could articulate each step as they did it, students felt a sense of accomplishment that they began to remark on and that I reinforced. They expressed positive feelings of accomplishment when solving problems, especially when overcoming challenging ideas. Comments like: "It feels like my brain is growing," "It opens my head," "When you learn something it stays in your brain," and "You keep practicing until you get it" indicated students' true ownership of learning.

One of my personal goals for teaching remotely was to do just that—increase students' ownership of their learning. I recognized that students would need to care about their own learning for remote instruction to be successful.

This exuberance over mastering skills actually led students to ask for more time to work on math. Two hours a day wasn't enough for some of them. One student came every afternoon for more, and I held classes on Wednesdays and some weekends as they frequently requested them.

Betsy connects with students personally. She talks about athletics with Emil and cooking with Ayla. She points out strengths that she sees in students, like Khan's algebra skills or Kenenisa's enjoyment of challenges.

Part of the key to this experience was clearly the small group of students, who already had a base

of trust with me and with each other. We had more time together than is possible for the vast majority of classrooms in this environment. The back-to-back support with the main class gave them a super dose of math every day.

I already knew the importance of a culture of trust and collaboration, but I did not know how to develop that culture in a remote learning environment. Observing Betsy's group of students led to me use intentional grouping with the rest of my students. I created groups of students that either already knew and trusted each other or that I thought could come to trust each other. I kept these groups consistent for long periods of time, checking in frequently and having them do tasks to get to know each other. There isn't the strength of culture that Betsy's group has, but I am hopeful this change will lead to small pockets of community.

Another key to the success was the way Ian set up his lessons. Every day was set out clearly and concisely, and a continuous thread of a "big math idea" was woven through the entire curriculum. This made it easy for me to follow and then convey to students, and the consistency and clarity of the format was easy for us to work with. I communicated to Ian most days about the capacities and needs of the ELL students, and he responded by tailoring lessons specifically to them. Since he had such a clear idea of the message he wanted to convey, he was able to simplify content without sacrificing important learning points. The focus was always on presenting problems that expose patterns, and the question, "What patterns can you see?"

Betsy's feedback helped me refine my planning. In the face-to-face classroom, I can read my students and adapt the details of my plan to fit their immediate learning needs. Remotely, I found this challenging. My conversations with some students helped guide me, but Betsy's shared insights strongly impacted the clarity of my lessons.

Most days Ian made a short video to explain the lesson. At first I was a bit skeptical of the value of that for our kids, but I came to see it as a gift. The videos were so clear and concise in content and delivery that I was able to convince the students to use them as a tool, by watching and rewatching, and by pausing to take notes and make drawings. If pandemic learning shows students they can learn almost anything online by watching a video . . . well, things could be a lot worse.

I read recently a reference to "the sad

simulacrum for human contact that is Zoom” (Menand, 2020). Of course we are all experiencing online learning as such. But for this small group of students, and for others, there have been notable and unexpected benefits, among them: increased abilities in managing technology (also clearly true for teachers!); the possibility of an intimate setting for concentrated communication without the distractions of an in-school classroom; and (forcibly) learning to be flexible in their acquisition of learning. Still, let’s hope it is over soon!

Betsy shared this letter with her ELL department and our school’s administration. Betsy and I continued to talk about their successes and we made new goals for them as language learners and as mathematicians. More complex mathematical relationships became accessible with their improved skills in language, technology, and collaborative learning. As the school year progressed, this group’s conversations transitioned from procedures to focus on ideas and reasoning.

When Betsy couldn’t make it to support class one day, I asked the group for a volunteer to lead. I returned later to find Jasmin explaining a problem about similarity. She explained the problem in depth, how each side was multiplied by the same factor. Then Tien explained the problem back, working through each piece herself. Jasmin then explained how she had originally been confused with a piece of the problem and how she had made sense of that piece. This conversation occurred with no prompting or guidance from a teacher; Jasmin and Tien worked through the problem together and reflected on what they learned.

When I started teaching remotely last year, I mentally and emotionally prepared myself to accept less success than I normally experience. However, with Betsy’s support, “Somewhat remarkable and unexpected achievements



For this small group of students, and for others, there have been notable and unexpected benefits.”

were made by a small group of students usually considered most unlikely to succeed in this very difficult learning environment.” They grew in their language abilities, their collaboration skills, their curiosity, and their awareness and ownership of their learning. I wanted to write and share this piece with you because, as Betsy writes, “Though I am under no illusion that the achievements I saw can be easily replicated, as they depend on some unique circumstances, I believe it is worth pointing out some of the successful tools and practices so that more creative minds can perhaps apply them in the future.”

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The Teacher I Want to Be When I Grow Up

Chris Lipski



Highlighting the best practices of senior teachers.

I sit at the teacher desk in my otherwise empty classroom. Calling this past year a challenge would be an understatement, but it was not without its positive moments.

As I reflect, I can't help but think of my colleagues. Their actions not only pushed me to be a better teacher this year, but inspire me to continue in the profession for many years to come.

Below are just a few examples of the teachers I hope to be when I grow up.



The goal of this morning's staff meeting (over Zoom) is to give teachers strategies to help engage students and promote their social and emotional well-being. Prior to this morning, I took a socially distant walk with my colleague who helped to plan this meeting. I know she has done a lot of work thinking about how to engage students over a digital platform; she teaches ninth-grade students who have yet to step foot onto our school's campus.

Interestingly, though, I don't see my colleague share any of her strategies during this staff meeting. Instead, she has introduced a few of the presenters, praising

them for sharing. The spotlight is never on her; rather, she has convinced members of our staff that rarely speak up to share. We hear a mix of voices, some from teachers who have been on staff for more than a decade, some who are first-year teachers. As the meeting continues, it becomes clear that she has carefully planned this meeting to both give ideas for engagement but also to model how the "teacher" can step back and allow the "class" to speak.

This isn't the first time I have seen my colleague "lead from behind." She is the teacher I want to be when I grow up.



It's a few weeks into the semester. Teachers are back on campus, but students still remain at home. Another chemistry teacher comes into my room after third period to let me know that, somehow, he managed to put his computer in airplane mode during class. Technology has not been his friend this year, or really ever since I've come to work at this school. He's not angry per se, already moving on to finding the situation humorous.

It's clear my colleague was frustrated by the setback, but he relays that he was able to turn his internet back on and rejoin the Zoom meeting. I imagine how, after a moment of panic, he managed to restart everything and try again. The highlight of the situation is that his students had all patiently waited in the Zoom classroom for him to return. It was a moment that he could easily have gone beyond mild frustration; instead, he chose to persevere.



This isn't the first time I have seen my colleague 'lead from behind.' She is the teacher I want to be when I grow up."

I realize just how often my colleague does this. Presented with ever-changing instructional technology, he has always tried out new things and kept a mostly positive attitude. When my colleagues and I ask him to try out a new strategy he is always game, and afterward he will focus on what he has learned from the experience rather than complain about how hard it might have been. He is the teacher I want to be when I grow up.



Drawing chemical structures or formulas on Google Docs is not a straightforward endeavor. It's late in the semester, and personally, I am very tired. This means that, instead of having students create these (important!) responses on their own, I've opted for the easier multiple-choice type responses.

Early in my career, I believed multiple-choice to be the "old way" that was more common among senior staff members. Now, it's my more experienced colleague coming in with innovative assessment strategies while I'm resorting to what I consider to be bad habits. She excitedly announces during our chemistry PLC meeting that she has discovered an easy add-on that allows students to construct the responses in their online documents. With just a few clicks, students can easily create their own nuclear equations with correct formatting.

As I think back to before this year, it's clear to me now that she so often comes to our meetings with new solutions to issues on which I had just decided to "take the easy way out." The obvious implication is that she has thought deeply about an issue, explored the possible solutions, and then come back to our meeting to share. She does this knowing we might not use it, or that we might come to her for more help with figuring it out.

My colleague is constantly looking for ways to improve the "small things" in our curriculum and freely sharing. She is the teacher I want to be when I grow up.



I'm in (yet another) Zoom meeting, this time with chemistry teachers from around our district. The facilitator is no stranger to me; I was her student teacher when I first joined this profession. I can attribute much of my teaching philosophy and strategies to my time with her.

Today, my colleague is pushing our district team to think about how we can bring science phenomena into students' homes. The logistics and cost of large take-home lab kits are daunting, but she has excitedly shown us how we can use some water, straws, and pH indicators to demonstrate the effects of CO₂ in water. She knows even this will be hard to get to every student, but she stresses to us how important it is that students get at least some hands-on experience this year.

I am reminded of the year I worked with my colleague, and how much time we spent putting together labs so that students could experience chemistry. This has always been her passion, and even distance learning hasn't dampened it. She is the teacher I want to be when I grow up.



We have nearly reached the one-year mark since physical classrooms closed. I am back at my desk, in my empty room, reflecting on these stories.



My colleagues are 'set' in giving voice to others, learning from challenging situations, sharing ideas and solutions, and constantly keeping the students' experience at the front of their minds."

Collectively, these teachers have a good 65+ years of teaching experience. For most of them, this year of distance learning comes at the tail end of their careers, a period in which we often label teachers as “set in their ways.” What I noticed this year is that, while I would argue they are all set in their ways, it is not with the negative connotation typically associated with the phrase.

My colleagues are “set” in giving voice to others, learning from challenging situations, sharing ideas and solutions, and constantly keeping the students’ experience at the front of their minds. As a mid-career teacher, I am not without these traits, but I hope that I can continue to find them in my senior colleagues, and push myself to continue to make them permanent parts of my practice.

Citation

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The Power of Compassionate Leadership: Interviewing Principal Marcy Leonard

Brittany Franckowiak



In a reflective conversation with my principal, I uncover how her leadership has supported teaching and learning during a time of crisis.

Shut Up & Listen

When my principal, Marcy Leonard, asks me how I'm doing, I am always honest. I don't say "fine." I can use adjectives like tired or angry or uncertain or hopeful because I'm confident Marcy actually wants to know how I'm really doing.

Since our buildings closed in March 2020, Marcy has held regular open office hours in Google Meet. One day a week she is available for staff, one day a week she is available for families, and one day a week she is available for students. People show up and Marcy listens.

Marcy listens authentically, a disposition she's honed in her years of teaching and administration. I go to Marcy with big ideas, petty complaints, serious concerns, and genuine questions; she has been a gracious audience for all of it. Sometimes she answers my questions with questions, sometimes she supplies good advice, and sometimes she just acknowledges the thing I'm putting out into the world.

Recently, I reflected with Marcy in an interview about how our school community is managing to hold together

during the various national crises that have defined our lives since March 2020. "We are asking teachers to do the impossible," Marcy acknowledged. "One of the most important things you can do as a leader is to shut up and listen."

Teaching conditions at my school specifically and in my district broadly are relatively teacher-friendly. We have been in full time virtual learning with a modified schedule that reduces our total student load and number of sections. We are not required to report to buildings, but we have building access. We have protected planning time every school day and an entire day with no synchronous instruction to make room for collaboration and grading. It's not perfect. But it is manageable and the breathing space our schedule creates has been necessary for my mental health this year.

Early on in the crisis, Marcy sought out the voices of the teachers and staff members to learn what their most pressing concerns were. In her words: "We can do all the messaging in the world, but if it's not aligned to where people's minds and hearts are, then it's going to fall on deaf ears." And so Marcy discovered that in addition to stress about grading and curriculum expectations, many staff members were also carrying the stress of how to teach from home with small children at home. "I don't have that experience," Marcy reflected, "but I need to know that experience is a driver for a number of our staff and respond accordingly." This explains all of the new friendships Marcy has forged with the children of my colleagues over Google Meet this year; knowing that so many of our staff are also caregivers means that Marcy has explicitly welcomed

children in our staff Google Meets. And they always want to say hi to Marcy.

Shout from the Rooftops

I let go of so much in my classes in 2020: semi-conservative DNA replication, bioinformatics, meiosis, electrophoresis, cellular respiration, and sex-linked inheritance. Some things have been cheerfully thrown out the window; others were hard to part with. More than once, I made a weekly agenda, realized it was asking too much of my students, and decided to remove a biology idea.

I am deeply in love with my content, and I take a lot of pride in how much biology I'm usually able to think about with my students. But this school year robbed me of time, changed my calendar, disrupted my sleep, and put screens between me and my students. My students were suddenly being asked to do much more on their own, often while supervising or co-existing with siblings, sometimes while sharing devices or dealing with technology barriers, all while navigating the same national crises that were bearing down on my own spirit. I lightened the load for all of us by making my peace with a pared-down curriculum.

I didn't need Marcy's permission to revise my curriculum for the year. Nonetheless, I felt a great sense of relief when I saw Marcy's slides for our first real staff meeting of the 2020–2021 academic year. In all caps, on one of the first slides, was the clear directive: "DON'T COVER THE CURRICULUM." She reminded us regularly throughout our week of planning time that she did not expect, and in fact did not want, us to cram all of the learning from a normal year into our virtual classrooms in a pandemic.

I didn't need Marcy's permission, but her unambiguous

blessing on my curriculum-cutting was a gift of certainty and confidence. I did not need to waste energy wondering whether I'd done the right thing. I did not need to spend any brainpower trying to rationalize the decision to cut content. Marcy's directive did that work for me. I wasn't covering the curriculum, and that was a sound decision, and I could move on with my work.

Marcy anticipated that some staff would feel self-imposed pressure to cover their usual curriculum, and she recognized that efforts to do so would not be sustainable for staff or students. Marcy believes that the messages to shout from the rooftops are the ones that defy assumptions and conventions. Teachers might expect their administrators to prioritize "covering curriculum;" Marcy needed to ensure that we all understood her position on the question of curriculum coverage during a pandemic. "You have to scream it," Marcy acknowledged, "and you have to sometimes drop a curse word to get people to pay attention and think, 'Wait, did she say don't cover the curriculum?'" So that folks take the pressure off of themselves to do things that are not going to be good for them, which means it's not good for their kids. School leadership needs to make sure that the teachers and the instructional staff, and all of the staff, have the permission and the messaging to take care of the kids in ways that we know are best for kids, because it's our staff that are the ones doing the direct support for the kids now."

Do Those Little Things

Every formal agenda Marcy has made since March 2020 begins with the same bullet point: "Take care of yourselves and your loved ones first."

Among teachers, self-care is a notoriously elusive ideal. We are used to hearing the phrase thrown around as our professional responsibilities threaten to overwhelm us. Frankly, I've never had much cause to listen to an administrator talking about self care; it always seemed to be a perfunctory add-on to the end of a long list of work expectations and problems that needed solving.

I asked Marcy about this bluntly in our conversation: "Including 'take care of yourself and your family' on every agenda is potentially really powerful . . . and also potentially really hollow. You can't tell your folks to take care of themselves and then give them 17 things to worry about. Especially this year, you can't just put out this kind of performative positivity. I'm curious—how do you think about enacting those bullet points from the agendas?"

"I think you're right on for that, it becomes very easy for it to be performative," Marcy answered earnestly.



Every formal agenda Marcy has made since March 2020 begins with the same bullet point: 'Take care of yourselves and your loved ones first.'

"So I think it's really the little things . . . [There's] a Mother Teresa quote: 'We can do no great things, only small things with great love.'" Marcy has learned that dramatic, flashy gestures tend not to generate meaningful or lasting results. Instead, she focuses her energy on consistency with what she considers "little things." Little things like specifically directing teachers to power their computers down on Friday afternoon, expressly encouraging staff to make use of available leave to care for family members, holding a position open for a staff member out on medical leave. "It's got to be everything. All the messaging all the time needs to align with the priorities and the vision, or it just becomes empty words," Marcy mused.

This school year, I got an additional planning period in my schedule to make time for my formal leadership role in teacher development. I had initially hesitated to accept the extra planning time. Time is, of course, the most valuable commodity a teacher can be offered. I knew that the school year was going to be taxing on everyone, and I worried that accepting the additional planning time would be selfish. After talking in circles for a few minutes, my team leader finally said, "Marcy told me that she wants to see the female leadership in the building advocate more for themselves and their needs. We don't ever ask for anything. Take the planning period."

The extra planning time has allowed me to regularly end my work day at a reasonable time while meeting my various responsibilities. I could have done the work without the planning period; I would have worked late, as I have before, and it would have been fine. But Marcy pointing out that the women on our staff are less likely to advocate for what we need made me realize that asking for extra time to take care of my extra responsibilities was reasonable. I don't need to feel guilty about being able to get my work done during the work day.

In the scheme of a school year, from a principal's perspective, my schedule is surely a little thing. I'm so grateful Marcy took the time to pester my team leader to pester me about taking the time I need to do meaningful work.

Full Speed Ahead

Here's a non-exhaustive list of what's happening at our school during virtual, pandemic instruction:

- Staff are participating in one of six different peer-facilitated professional learning pathways, all intentionally focused on equity and racial justice.
- A student advisory committee representative of our student body meets regularly with



It is a remarkable thing to experience a whole bunch of teachers focusing all of their teacher energy on exactly the issue they find most urgent because their principal agrees that it is most urgent."

administration to provide input on school policy, propose action steps for school improvement, and share their concerns. These meetings are facilitated by students.

- A team of educators—our Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Coalition—has created a weekly virtual discussion space for the group Students for Social Justice. These meetings are facilitated by students.
- As part of a local restorative justice cohort, many of our staff have been participating in voluntary book clubs focused on racial justice.

I've been marveling at everything our community is doing. So I brought this up with Marcy: "I'm not sure we would have been able to make the same kind of progress without this crisis. Does that resonate with you at all?"

"I think we're three to five years ahead of where we would have been . . . because of the pandemic . . . We were slow-playing the restorative justice work last year [2019] in really purposeful ways, and we have had the opportunity to put it on fast forward. Some of that is because we started pushing fast-forward, and people were like, 'Yeah! Let's go.' I think if people's responses had been, 'No, I don't have the bandwidth,' we would have slowed down; we wouldn't have forced it. But people have been responding to the messaging. People have stepped up into leadership roles in amazingly powerful ways. The responses have been so incredibly positive, so, 'Okay, let's keep going.'"

I asked Marcy what parts of our progress she was particularly surprised by or pleased with. "So many

things! Including students in decision making and amplifying student voice. I was gonna say building leadership capacity of staff, but I don't think we've done a ton of building the leadership capacity of staff. I think we just created leadership opportunities for staff and really talented staff members stepped into them and ran with them in really incredible ways. I mean, your work for professional learning has been, I think, revolutionary. [Our School Improvement Co-Chairs] have explained the school improvement process to our staff and engaged them more effectively than I ever have done as an educational leader. Having an entire Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Coalition, because we had like a dozen people applying for the one position and we needed to do more than just pick one and tell 11 to go pound sand."

Marcy is clearly on a roll now. "All of the different pieces that we're doing with having educator leaders—not just teacher leaders, but educator leaders. We're now trying to bring in that third leg of the stool with getting parent and family participation. I think really the opportunity to think philosophically about, what does it mean to teach a content area? What is covering the curriculum versus mastery of standards? What am I required to teach as a teacher, and who gets to make that decision? And how am I choosing to instruct? Certainly the grading and assessment conversations and changes that are occurring . . ." While Marcy cogently summarizes the whole web of complex questions various teams of staff are tackling this year, I am just astounded that she has such detailed knowledge of so many moving pieces.

And I'm gratified that our work, even the work that is still only in its conversational stages, is noticed and appreciated.

Be Ready or Get Off the Bus

I came into our conversation guided by the idea that our school was accomplishing a lot and holding together during a pandemic, and I viewed the pandemic as the catalyst. But Marcy pointed to a different event. "Even more so than the pandemic . . . from George Floyd's murder on, it was 'Be ready or get off the bus.'"

"[We are] able to talk not just around diversity, equity and inclusion, but to name racism . . . to name all of the -isms and to really focus hard and specifically on anti-racism and the impact of trauma. That language wouldn't have been the language if we were still in the building and if George Floyd hadn't been murdered. I would have waited a little longer for people to be ready."

Marcy has always been forthright about positioning equity and justice as the real drivers of our work. This is not the first year, or the first school community, in which she has explicitly worked on developing anti-

racist dispositions and action steps with staff. Among our staff, there has been a contingent of folks working more or less quietly, more or less formally, on these ideas for years. George Floyd's murder had the effect of galvanizing the staff who were already engaging in anti-racist work. We were desperate for action—and we had a leader desperate for the same action. It is a remarkable thing to experience a whole bunch of teachers focusing all of their teacher energy on exactly the issue they find most urgent because their principal agrees that it is most urgent.

We never needed permission to confront racism in our community and in our classrooms. But we have been able to do a whole lot more, more quickly because our administration prioritizes and emphasizes the work. Centering anti-racism has become a professional expectation in our staff community.

When Vision Becomes Culture

Marcy uses vision much more effectively than most leadership I've worked with. Her vision centers on equitable learning, school community, and post-secondary preparation. It's been remarkably durable messaging, and it actively drives our work. When our school buildings closed in March 2020, the steadiness of Marcy's vision helped me feel grounded and calm. I knew that whatever school might look like, we would have the same guiding priorities, and they were worthwhile.

Marcy knows full well that simply having a vision doesn't guarantee progress or community. She is committed to translating vision into culture: "School



School culture—or any organization's culture—is the way we do things around here. Saying 'racism doesn't exist' isn't the way we do things around here. It's not a part of our culture."

culture—or any organization's culture—is the way we do things around here. Saying 'racism doesn't exist' isn't the way we do things around here. It's not a part of our culture. A leader can articulate a vision. But if the vision doesn't become a part of the culture, then it's just performative language. Part of what has been incredibly inspiring this year is our vision becoming our culture."

What's been incredibly inspiring this year is having a compassionate leader who makes space for all of us to be human while respecting our professional judgment and knowledge. What's been incredibly inspiring is the explicit permission to take care of myself, and to take care of my students, and the support to make it possible. What's been incredibly inspiring has been participating in a school community where anti-racism is visible at every level of the work.

Citation

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What is a Good Day for me in Distance Learning?

Brenda Minjares

What is a day of school really like in the pandemic?

As I pour the hot coffee my partner prepared into my travel-friendly thermos, I think about whether today is an odd block or even block. Either way, I'm off to a good start: before the pandemic, neither of us had the time in the mornings to brew our own coffee during the week, but now that he is working from home, it is a daily treat for me. Today is Thursday, which means it's the first day I see my even periods. I haven't seen them since last Friday; do they even remember what the lesson topic was? Have they checked their messages? I sent a Remind a few days prior, trying my best to adhere to my own rule of no messages to students longer than 25 words. Any instructions longer than that and my engagement drops by the dozens.

I make my 20-minute drive to campus, where I park in the lot that affords me the longest walk to my classroom. Another morning treat. I won't be walking much the rest of the day. I linger in the car listening to the morning news from the radio, again feeling guilty for not replacing the news feed with a more spiritual or informative podcast. I mask up, reserving putting my second mask on until I get to my classroom—rather, “the” classroom that I work from.

I make my walk across campus towards the front office to get screened. As I make my way up the stairs, I give my usual “No and no” to Tracy, who need not repeat the

COVID-19 screening questions because, at this point, I've heard them almost a hundred times from her. Once for each day I attend campus. I pick up my attendance sheet from the secretary. As I place the small sticker indicating today's date on my more-casual-than-usual work outfit, I scan the list of 15 students assigned to me. Pretty identical list to the day before. I walk up to the classroom, formerly “my” classroom.

The classroom I work in is sterile now. Literally and figuratively. Before the nightly sanitation procedures, back in May, I removed all my possessions as directed by administration. To leave the room as empty of our personal items as possible. No posters on representation in science. No bulletin board of pictures and “thank-you” cards from my previous students. And the roomy, large group tables were replaced by a dozen and a half individual desks with the built-in armrest to the right side, each spaced six feet apart as determined by the “x” marks of tape on the beige tile floor. I let the students in, but not before propping the door open and switching on the HEPA filter in the middle of the room.

“Good morning!!” I say enthusiastically, as six or seven students walk into the room to log into their 8:30 a.m. class. I take the chance early every morning to set a positive and excited tone to the day. It's been about three months now that we've been “podded” together. My school established learning pods mid-November in response to the need for students to have a stable place to work from during distance learning. I volunteered in December—with about two dozen other teachers at my large, public urban high school in southern California—to be a pod teacher, taking on the additional responsibility of assisting the attending



I think many students, when they heard about an opportunity to 'come to campus' for school, didn't necessarily envision a 6.5 hour day of sitting in the same, hard-backed desk logged in and plugged into back-to-back virtual class sessions, roomed with a handful of other students they may not necessarily share a class with and an adult that may not necessarily be one of their teachers on record."

students with their online coursework by helping them clarify instructions, catch up on missing work, and generally maintain a healthy attitude towards school. The day I started to win these little humans over, I think, was the day (about six weeks into learning pods) I started bringing cup noodles as an alternative to their school lunch, which is delivered daily at 12:30 p.m. One day, after about eight weeks of being in a pod, I realized we needed more fun, so I played an episode of "The Simpsons" on the projector during lunch. We laughed. It was probably the first time we laughed together.

One day, I asked students to use a whiteboard that I propped next to each of their desks to keep track of their assignments, and four of them obliged. After a week of pushing that system, one student decided to stop attending the learning pods. I called home and guardians suggested that their student was too depressed to come to campus.

I don't blame him. I think many students, when they heard about an opportunity to "come to campus" for

school, didn't necessarily envision a 6.5 hour day of sitting in the same, hard-backed desk logged in and plugged into back-to-back virtual class sessions, roomed with a handful of other students they may not necessarily share a class with and an adult that may not necessarily be one of their teachers on record. But we've learned to make the best of it.

My learning pod shares a group chat in Microsoft Teams. When I renamed the group chat as "Minjares' Learning Pod 303," one of them renamed it "Minjares' Chaos Pod 303." One day they showed me how to download Minecraft on my school-provided laptop, and collectively gave me a tutorial on what I could do in "creative mode." They started assigning themselves jobs as they observed, day after day, that I would spray and wipe down their desks as I dismissed them at 3:15 p.m. As the weeks passed, I didn't have to nag too much to get them to update their to-do list on their individual whiteboards on a daily basis. Then, one day, one of the students created a Jeopardy-style game board filled with a combination of Pokemon trivia and trivia about our learning pod, like "How many students have been in the pod?" (the answer was 13), and "Who's job is it to spray the tables?" (the answer was Lupe), and "What is something special that Ms. M has in her room?" (the answer was a microwave).

Meanwhile, I've made little progress in building connections with my roster of "virtual" students. On my best days, I start class with a meme or joke that at most three to four students will react to. I use PearDeck religiously, and I jump for joy when I can get 50 percent of those logged into the Teams meeting also logged into the PearDeck.

I start virtual lessons by asking check-in questions like, "What are you grateful for today?" and "What's a motivational quote that inspired you?" On good days, I can move through a demonstration of a skill efficiently enough to have time to prompt them to show examples of their work live. I get to give immediate feedback and move at a pace that matches where they are. I usually do this by having them draw a diagram or construct an evidence-based explanation on PearDeck. By that point, about 20 to 30 minutes after the start of the live virtual session, I'm excited to have 10 students (out of 30 logged in) to show examples of their work so I can formatively assess.

After a 45-minute attempt at sharing my excitement for physics learning and students' science ideas, I say something like "well, that's our time for today..." and sometimes, rarely, I'll notice the participants number instantly drop by one. I remind students what is due as evidence of learning for the day and post a link in the chat, in addition to having it embedded on

the PearDeck slide. I tell them I love them, and that I hope they have a wonderful rest of the day because they deserve it. I've been speaking to a silent set of blank screens, some with really cute avatars or filtered pictures, for about 45 minutes. I click "End Recording" and proceed to paste the recording link to the Canvas home page, under the section called "Did you miss the LIVE session?" On a good day, my bilingual interpreter will chime in and remind the students to send us messages when they need help.

On a good day, I'll check Canvas to find that seven students submitted the assignment that during the 45-minute live session, I painstakingly explained, re-explained, and explained again in Spanish, with all oral instructions, succinctly (25 words or less) transcribed into the Teams chat and embedded the four-minute pre-recorded Loom video with instructions and examples. The moderator tab tells me another four students have the assignment opened on their browser. That's better than zero!

After the live session ends, I add my second layer of mask, pick up a pencil to use as a pointer, and pace around the room to ask if the learning pod students need anything. I might also bring a piece of paper with me with the message "What are you supposed to be doing right now?" that I can point to as I walk up to them and they're still logged into a live class lesson.

Lunchtime on a good day means that I get to see each of the learning pod students go outside and sit in direct sunlight, within the designated bounds, of course. During lunch, another learning pod teacher on campus and I bend the rules so that we can have a physically distanced social break. We've accepted the risks.

I understand why community members have been anxious about "reopening" schools. In my opinion, this is a misnomer because for many schools, campuses have been open, and for all schools, teachers are carrying out our service as best we can, given the circumstances and the lack of control over the learning environment. What I'm finding in my good days are evidence of human connection. When I connect with my learning pod students, when I can connect with my virtual students, I am rewarded with the feeling that the work I am doing is not in vain. If I can share some of myself, and get concrete proof that they related to what I said or frankly even heard me, I feel pretty good about the day.

Citation

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Recognizing Joy in 2020

A poem by Carlee Madis



Finding gifts amidst the strife and challenges posed by 2020.

2020: the year that may best be deemed a dumpster fire.
This year will certainly be one for history, seen often as quite dire.
We've sat with bad news and hours where we just doom-scrolled,
However, for me it seems that the hidden joys remain more untold.

At times it feels selfish to have felt life's peaks and happiness this year,
How can I look at this drowning world and still have moments of self-cheer?
Here I aim to spend the time reflecting on the types of joy in my 2020 life;
In no way to paint toxic positivity over the year of tremendous strife!

Joy 1: Professional Passion

[Beginning a job in April as a virtual math coach quickly unveiled the need for a professional community and to share an organization's vision for education; becoming a Knowles Program Fellow brought professional joy to the end of my 2020.]

Each day filled with waking up just in time to log in and be "present,"
Virtual icebreakers and "you're on mute" among things I resent.
Repeating the mantra each morning: "You have a deep love and passion for education,"
But knowing your current position is just a contribution to standardization nation.

How do you balance the gratitude for being employed while knowing you need more?
During this year, is it possible to even find a role to support teachers and a field you adore?

Then comes a glimmer of hope and an interview with familiar faces,
An organization that cares and wants to meet teachers in their unique places.
No doubt this has been a trying year for teachers and students alike;
Now I can offer support from a community that has always felt homelike.

Right from the beginning, I felt safe and comfortable to voice questions.

Despite being new, my voice was valued and space was given for my suggestions.
Each meeting, even though virtual, began with time for authentic connection.
The goals and passion for education felt they were truly in the right direction.

The field of education has left more to envision and question this year,
Time was given to appreciate and desire more from this essential career.
*Do you feel you made and had time to reflect upon your professional passion and goal?
How can you utilize the pace of 2020 to make changes that are within your control?*

Joy 2: A Distanced Community

[Many say there is no perfect time to bring a baby into the world; however, a global pandemic brought unique challenges as we prepare to bring this next adventure home!]

Though in our original dreaming, this was the right time in our family vision,
The challenges of this year started to make this a much harder decision.
It would be so much harder to celebrate and share with those who love us;
One of the greatest parts of this life change is having others make a fuss.

Is it possible to share this joy with loved ones with a pandemic underway?
Will they even care or be so overwhelmed that it just gets kept at bay?

At first we kept our news a secret and privately cheered as a party of two,
But it became obvious that we'd need others for what we were going through.
This was in-person news for our families, so we took a roadtrip of several miles.
Even from a 6-foot distance, we could feel the joy of their masked smiles.

The next few weeks were full of virtual calls with friends to share our news,
Our friends were thrilled for us and eager for a topic that wasn't the COVID blues.
We've grown to embrace the time spent with family and friends through Zoom,
This technology has allowed us to see lots of people from our own living room.

Although we still don't know when we will be in-person to give hugs and celebrate,
We're grateful for the virtual love and bonds we've been challenged to create.
*Have the changes of 2020 pushed your vision of support and community?
How will you utilize these digital tools in a future connecting opportunity?*

Joy 3: New Pace & Head Space

[Every weekend was planned to a T and weekdays were rushed through with such urgency; 2020 pushed me to reevaluate my schedule and priorities.]

Before, each day felt a bit new and from the start it was "go-go-go";
Getting ready for people you may see felt like preparing for a show.
Rushing when you got home to plan some leisure or quality time.
Thinking about work while you scarfed dinner had become the paradigm.

March 2020: the world took a collective, though masked, breath and pause.
Time to stay home, protecting yourself and others, with COVID as the cause.

At first, this time was filled with disappointments and a sense of frustration.
I found myself wondering about the unknown and the isolation duration.
It felt like our already small house grew tinier with each passing day,
Asking ourselves daily: how long can we keep living and working this way?

It took some negotiating and a great deal of relationship communication,
But our mindset shifted to embracing this time to build a refreshed foundation.

We talked about how this pause on urgent living would allow us to move slower, Life would start to look a bit different—it's not that the bar had to be lower.

We began to embrace the time for dog snuggles and extra family walks, Waking up with time to read and evenings spent with puzzles and deep talks. Deciding what to wear each day was no longer a big decision to make; This provided more time for resting and deciding on the next treat to bake.

Although we are uncertain of when this pandemic lifestyle will come to an end, Questioning the need for urgency and regular reflecting are habits I hope to extend. *What are the positive changes that 2020 enabled your household to embrace? How can you prioritize these and not easily retreat back to the urgency pace?*

**2021: the time has come for the calendar to yet again be turned.
May you be inspired to look back at 2020's small joys and lessons learned.**

Citation

Madis, C. (2021). Recognizing joy in 2020. *Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*, 8(1), 47–49.



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ABOUT KALEIDOSCOPE: EDUCATOR VOICES AND PERSPECTIVES

In December 2014, the Knowles Teacher Initiative published the inaugural issue of its new journal—*Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*. Through *Kaleidoscope*, Knowles shares stories from teachers about teaching, leading and learning.

Kaleidoscope strives to provide readers and writers a public space for discourse and dialogue about the knowledge and expertise of teachers and the complexity of our profession. We believe that teachers are well-positioned to improve education in their classrooms and beyond, and we know the power that storytelling and knowledge sharing can hold in the process of transforming educational outcomes for students.

Two issues of *Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives* are published each academic year (Spring and Fall).

ABOUT THE KNOWLES TEACHER INITIATIVE

The Knowles Teacher Initiative is a nonprofit organization that supports a national network of mathematics and science teachers who are collaborative, innovative leaders improving education for all students in the United States. We strive to create an educational system that is led by teachers who are equipped to solve difficult problems and respond to local challenges in order to serve all of our nation's students. For more information, visit www.knowledgeteachers.org.

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