

Teaching and Learning in the Age of COVID-19

The Lion and the Mouse: A Commentary on the Ways the Covid-19 Closure Has Impacted Education, Both Big and Small

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Inquiry: Share what you are experiencing about teaching and learning during this time

Jerry Pinkey's *The Lion and The Mouse* is a wordless adaptation of one of Aesop's most beloved fables, where an unlikely pair learn that no act of kindness is ever wasted. This children's book is unique in the sense that it tells the story (without any words, just illustrations) of a mouse who accidentally disturbs a lion from his rest, and the lion who makes a life-changing decision to release his prey. When the mouse remembers her debt, she frees the lion from a poacher's trap, proving that sometimes, "even the king needs help and little friends may prove to be great friends," (Pinkey 1).

This book was a gift given to me at my son's baby shower a little over eight years ago. It was a gift that I found myself pulling from my home library shelves as soon as the school closures began to happen across the state on March 13. I selected this picture book, among other more advanced children's books for my son Elijah, age 9, and my daughter Grace, age 7, to read when a break from home schoolwork would be needed. This book and others were to eventually join all of the other necessary school supplies in our dining room: the paper, both lined and unlined, two pink baskets of pencils, pens, and markers, scissors, glue, and an iPad. I was in the process of redesigning our dining room into a makeshift school room that weekend, fully preparing myself to now teach from home for the next duration of however long the school closures were going to last. The idea was to provide my two kids with a fun reading break from their school assignments I was going to be given via email from their two teachers. And so, this book, *The Lion and the Mouse* waited to be picked up when Momma (that's me) would decide that a fun break from this new home-school environment could take place. I had imagined this would occur about 40 minutes into the assignments, a chance for my children to take a "brain break" if you will. However, this book ended up being the first one I turned to before the home-schooling even began. While sitting at the large dining room table, just the three of us, ready for "class" to begin, I showed the book to Elijah and Grace saying, "Check out this book; Elijah, you got this gift a long time ago when you were a baby, remember? Grace, we used to look at these pictures and tell the story, remember?"

They did not remember.

"What do you mean," Grace asked, "There's no words."

"Yeah," I said, "But there's pictures. You have to be the one to tell the story."

"How?" Grace asked.

Teaching my two kids, one in third grade, the other in first, during this Covid-19 closure for the past two months has been a lot like approaching Pinkey's wordless adaptation of the *Lion and the Mouse*. There's "no words," for the story, just pictures, and it's up to me to tell the story, but the question remains the same: In the words of my little 7-year-old Gracie, "How?"

Yet, another question also comes to mind when I consider my experience while both teaching and learning to teach their assignments during this unique time—not just "How," but "Why?" Why continue learning when the schools are closed and there's no teacher to please, no students to compete against, no physical school building to attend?

Interestingly enough, it was this question of *why* that my third grader Elijah proposed during one of our more challenging math assignments concerning area and perimeter—subject matter I hadn't even thought about, or even needed to think about for over 30 years.

This happened a week into our home-schooling while my Gracie-Girl sat at the dining room table, practicing her week's spelling words, nibbling at a chocolate donut. I was helping Elijah trudge through a math problem. And my little brown-eyed-brown-haired people-pleasing third grader was becoming increasingly frustrated at the math assignment, and I was too.

He suddenly blurted out in anger, "Why do I have to do this!"

And I responded quickly, "Because your teacher wants you to!"

Not a proud Momma moment.

And certainly not a proud Teacher moment.

Therefore, it hasn't just been the *How*, but also the *Why* that plague me during these uncertain times—these two important inquiries into teaching and learning hit me like a one-two punch and I feel like I'm Rocky, taking the punches, one after another, but still standing. For it was Rocky Balboa's coach Mickey who taught him his life's motto in and out of the ring: "It aint' how hard you can hit, but how hard you can get hit, and keep moving forward."

Thus my teaching and learning experience amidst the age of Covid-19 has been, in a word, hard, but I keep moving forward, and I'm getting hit hard with anxiety, fear of the unknown, stress of learning new technology to connect with my high school students while also getting hit with weekly emailed assignments from my children's teachers. This is really, really hard. Finding a healthy balance between the challenge to teach my English classes from home in a meaningful way AND learning HOW to teach my kids is not easy. It's hard.

And yet the high school English teacher within me shouts, "No, hard isn't the right word here—rocks are hard."

That's what I always tell my ninth graders when they attempt to use that adjective to describe a challenge, or when they ask, "Will the midterm be hard," to which I smile and reply, "No it's not hard, rocks are hard; the midterm will be challenging."

No doubt their reaction is an eye roll when they turn around. You would think that after 18 years teaching high school English, I would have let go of that facetious phrase, "No, rocks are hard," but it's one of those things I just find myself saying regardless.

So yes, this experience has been hard, and continues to be hard.

And for good reason.

Three actually.

Fear, failure, and freedom have become my foes, and it's for these three reasons that I find difficulty in approaching my new-normal in this age of school closure. It's a mix, a toxic one, that I didn't even know could exist until now, and it's become a powerful force that continues to impede faith in my own pedagogy. I find myself staring at Jerry Pinkey's *The Lion and the Mouse*, and though I see the pictures, I don't know how to best tell the story, and I don't know why it should be told.

Can a happy ending even exist in these unprecedented times? Are we all just relying on our own story-telling instincts, hoping for the best? Can we put faith in "distance learning" or is it just "distant" learning? Furthermore, can learning ever be distant? Or is there a closeness of cultures required for learning to occur, to really make it feel alive and worth pursuing?

Facing The Fear:

My fear began on Friday March 13 when the school closure was announced across my district. Administration alerted families that they could pick up all of the teaching materials parents would need for their elementary students to get through the next two weeks plus. Parents were given allotted times to drive to the school to get the many assignments and photocopies and books. Though my husband picked up the materials, the fear of exposure to the virus forced us to leave the assignments sitting in a great big meaningless pile in our vehicle for days. We didn't want to touch it; we didn't want our children to touch it. So that great big pile of assignments became more and more meaningless as the days went by.

A week passed.

Elijah and Grace spent the first week away from school like it was summer vacation, while mom and dad dreaded approaching the pile of work.

Thankfully, it was that first week that also gave me time to set up my English classes with online assignments and blog projects. I reduced the workload, as per administration's guidance, and felt content with the tasks that lay ahead for my ninth graders. The stress of implementing more via google meets and screencasting videos of me talking to my classes didn't exist quite yet, no, that would come later. For now it was making sure we were all home, safe, and healthy.

Much like the rest of America, we were glued to the television—news alerts. Our fear of contracting the virus grew and grew. Our number one concern was staying safe and healthy and the daily updates of people getting sick every day caused a perspective shift. In the back of my mind I thought about those assignments for Elijah and Grace sitting in my car—what was the purpose of that curriculum and would I be able to help them through it?

And so, the notion of home-school, at first, felt a lot like being that lion caught in the poacher's trap: stuck inside this fear of what to do next. Trapped: nowhere to turn. Nowhere to go.

Thankfully as my interest in checking my phone every few minutes for news updates waned, and my fear of touching the school materials faded, and with the help of my husband, we organized the daily assignments for Elijah and Grace, and began co-teaching the two of them in the dining room.

The fear had passed, yes, but now a second wave of challenge had also begun: facing failure.

Not Elijah's failure.

Not Grace's.

My own.

Facing Fear of Failure:

It's hard (there's that word again) for me to admit this next truth about my experience during this closure thus far concerning teaching and learning, but I'm going to admit it regardless: I had to face my fear of failing on two fronts: One as my son's and daughter's teacher. And another as my ninth graders' teacher. Quite *A Tale of Two Teachers*, if you'd ask Charles Dickens, right? And ironically, my classes were smack dab in the middle of reading *A Tale of Two Cities* when the school closure was announced, that and a research paper, weekly essays, and wrapping up *Romeo and Juliet*. A lot was going on in my own teaching world, and to add to that the challenge of teaching my two kids was going to be no doubt about it: hard. What if I couldn't do it? What if I failed?

First, I failed at being patient with my own kids.

However, it was TribLIVE reporter Lori Falce who made me feel less like a villain during these unique circumstances. Her April 2 opinion piece, *Reluctant Covid-19 Home School Lessons* echoed my own fear of failures as a teacher and a mother, navigating these uncharted waters. She writes, “I have never wanted to home-school. While I want my son to reach for knowledge, and I want to be his partner in finding it, I have never wanted to be his teacher.”

Reading her thoughts appeased my own secret failings as a mother and teacher. She, as well as I, knew it was not going to be an easy task: “I knew it was not going to be easy for either of us. My kid has ADHD and functions best with structure and routine. He also requires a lot of supervision to stay on task. Independent work on something he loves is simple. On something that bores him, it’s nigh on impossible,” she admits.

She, as well as I, also knew a lot more goes into teaching than assigning work. Falce explains, “Teaching isn’t just about moving facts from a book to a kid’s head, like downloading a file or stuffing an envelope. With a class, it’s drawing attention and getting a reaction, like a photographer taking a group shot and getting everyone to smile at the same time. With a single kid, it’s like hiding a pill in a chunk of cheese to get your dog to swallow it — and if that doesn’t work, stuffing it in his snout and forcing him to swallow.”

How could this TribLIVE reporter know so much of what I was feeling myself? Her article reaches a new level of honesty when she writes: “And I hate it. I don’t want to crack the ruler. I want to help him with his homework, not teach him about math that I barely remember from 6th grade. He doesn’t like it either. He likes when school is school and home is home. Quarantine status is ripping down those walls and making it seem like he is chained to a desk he never leaves.”

Could it be that I was hating this new process of teaching and learning? Hate is such a strong word—as far as I could express, and even now, this wasn’t something I was hating—this was something that was “hard.” And still, I resonated with this writer’s experience teaching her son at home.

She finalizes, “If some good comes out of the whole frustrating process, it might be more understanding and appreciation between parents and educators, and kids who look forward to putting walls back up between home and school.”

I like the way she articulates this last part because it alludes to the need for walls, which was something I felt I had been fighting against for years—the notion of the rigid school structure—the routine of school—it was something I felt along with my own students, something I thought should change, and be less rigid. But now—this overwhelming amount of freedom that the Covid-19 closure provided was just too much for me as a mother and a teacher.

And that’s how I faced failure as a teacher for my high school students too. I found myself assigning tasks each week—not teaching—isn’t teaching MORE than assigning? Yes—but how to do that in this new distance learning environment? I would have to LEARN something new—learning how to use new technology to connect with my students made me feel like I was still that lion, struggling in the poacher’s net, struggling to be free.

Facing the Fear of Freedom

Negan is a character from AMC’s series *The Walking Dead*—and it was freedom that he sought, too, and freedom that he actually gets after spending eight years in a prison. In one of the episodes, his prison door is accidentally left unlocked, and he spends a night and a day escaping, navigating his old abandoned homestead, fighting off zombies, better known as “walkers.” By the end of the episode, and by the end of his first full day “free” from his prison cell, Negan

makes his way back to the only home he had ever known—the prison—and locks himself back in, realizing life outside those protective walls wasn't all it promised. The grass wasn't greener on the other side, and he didn't feel much freer on the outside. In fact, he felt much safer, much more secure, and much more free to live while inside his cage.

And I get it.

I get the fear of so much freedom involved in learning and teaching at home. I watched that episode during the fifth week of quarantine—at a time when the stay at home orders had increased greatly, and I began to wonder if things—if education will ever return to “normal.” It occurred to me that I had been greatly missing the walls and structure that school had been providing for me for so long, and I just wanted to go back.

Freedom from school meant a new term for me: “distance learning.” And with distance learning came administration's encouragement to branch out of our comfort zones to learn new teaching techniques: screen casts, zoom meetings, google meets, and more, oh my. Intimidation flooded my once strong pedagogical mindset and this old dog didn't want to learn new tricks. Thus, freedom from the physical building became a burden—a burden to learn.

Just like my initial fear of touching my kids' schoolwork out of anxiety and fear of contracting the virus faded, thankfully my initial fear of learning new teaching techniques faded, too, and I started treading water instead of drowning in it.

And yet, that fear and that anger that I know my son Elijah was feeling, too, at this initial change in the ways he learns and the way I teach: it still resides. There's a pain of being caught up in that poacher's trap—the Covid-19 school closure trap—that has changed our teaching and learning culture. And I really don't know how this story ends. We all see the pictures—but the way we tell the story differs, perhaps each and every time we consider such things upon reflection.

William Pinar's “The Method of Currere” explores the notion of laying down the path while walking on it—a framework for teaching requiring teachers to reflect upon their life experiences, and allowing those life experiences to inform their pedagogy. I take heart in this methodology, but a huge part of me just wants to hurry up and get to the end—end of the story, end of the path—I feel the constant reflection wave hitting me in the heart on a daily basis. Feelings of inadequacy as my son's and daughter's teacher and mother plague me. I'm sick with a fever of failure amidst this freedom and it just causes more fear—fear that I'm not doing enough good to overcome these feelings of a bad attitude towards what could potentially be a good outcome to the educational process.

In short, while I still feel that I'm like lion caught in the trap, there's a part of me that fears that meek mouse trying to free me, for that freedom is a fresh perspective on the way I've been teaching for the past 18 years. *What if it's time to learn something new*, the meek mouse whispers. *What if a new approach to teaching is exactly what you need to learn right now—could there be freedom in that?* she beckons.

There could be, I admit to myself.

How?

Why?

The lion caught up in the net continues the struggle.

What I'm coming to know is that the struggle IS part of this teaching and learning process I'm going through. It's the struggle to be free in the face of fear, failure, and freedom.

And so I've found myself approaching the "How" day by day—I had to—the alternative was a stressful anxiety attacking state of panic of how was I going to be my son and daughter's teacher AND be an English teacher for my high school students.

It took a few weeks, but I have grown more patient with my kids, and I'm patting myself on the back for learning how to screencast, zoom meet, and google meet, oh my!

But it's the "why" that challenges me still—yet that's a question I had returned to often anyway, even before the Covid-19 school closure. Being a reflective teacher demands such a question on a regular basis.

Why learn this skill?

Why complete this assignment?

Why write about this topic?

Because the alternative is silence.

The alternative is stagnancy- a staid state of quiet that can't express what it means to be human.

To be human is to always be learning, growing, because if we aren't doing those things, then we are dead inside. Cold. Lifeless.

Reminds me of P.T. Barnum's first attempts at bringing his circus spectacle to the masses. He featured wax figures of lions, tigers, and bears.

Oh my.

A complete still-life spectacle that was anything but.

It was just dead.

The 2016 musical film, "The Greatest Showman," explores this turning point in his approach to entertainment quite well when P.T. Barnum's (played by Hugh Jackman) daughter encourages, "You need something sensational, something alive."

That perspective changes everything and it was then that the circus comes alive with the unique and rare performers we know about today: trapeze artists, bearded ladies, and sword swallows, oh my.

Teaching and learning is a very ALIVE pursuit that works on a praxis, and no amount of social distancing and distance learning can crush that desire to feel alive.

"You stumble through the days, got your head hung low, your skies are a shade of gray, like a zombie in a maze, you're asleep inside, but you can shake awake," Jackman sings in the film.

"Cause you're just a dead man walking, thinking that's your only option," he explains. "But you can flip the switch and brighten up your darkest day. Sun is up and the color's blinding, take a world and redefine it. Leave behind your narrow mind; you'll never be the same."

"Come alive, come alive," he beckons. "Dream with your eyes wide open and you know you can't go back again to the world you were living in because you're now dreaming with your eyes wide open."

No more stumbling through the days. Face the fear. Face the fear of failure. Face the freedom. Dream with your eyes wide open. We can't go back again to the world we were living in. Take a world and redefine it. Let's leave behind our narrow mind.

Tell the story.

How? We have to all be the one to tell the story, just with a new perspective.

Why? To feel alive.

Oh my!