

My Journey Through the Pandemic...

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Prologue:

Suddenly, without any warning, the floor is pulled out from under me and I'm falling...I fall into a huge expanse of water and when I look around, I can see no shore nearby and nothing that I can use as a buoy to cling on to and keep me afloat...

Core Teaching Beliefs

I have always believed in the importance of the student-teacher bond: the need for creating a connection with students. When trying to reach students, I am of the opinion that many times, it is not what you do, but how you do it, that determines how effective this is. In fact, as Stevick (1980) explained "success (in learning a foreign language) depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom" (p.4). Even though, as an academic English teacher, I do not spend a vast amount of time with my students each week, I think spending some time getting to know them more, is time well spent. Tapping into the EQ side of education is important, and being able to read, understand and affect people is a crucial factor in effective teaching.

Professional Development Pre-Pandemic Mode

Until the pandemic, I considered myself experienced in the field of teaching and in my abilities to connect with my students: to read, understand and affect them in ways that contributed to their learning experience and the experience of the class, as a whole. Through trial and error, and very much at my own pace, I had developed a variety of methods to go beyond what we get as a snapshot of our classes and tried to see the learners in a much more 3-dimensional sense. Utilising channels that lifted the lid on the constraints of the normal classroom and provided insight into what is happening with students in their real lives was something I put great effort into. Instead of merely 'seeing' students for our regular class sessions each week, over the years, I had developed means to communicate with them one to one and have real conversations about whatever was going on in their heads at the time. As my years of teaching progressed, I felt like there was an increase in the student-teacher bond. I tried different means and felt like I was really making progress until the pandemic hit. Like I said, most of what I learned was through my own trials and tribulations in my classroom practices, and I did not always actively seek out ways of doing this from other sources – I thought I coped well using my own means.

Reactionary Pandemic Mode

Then, the pandemic hit. Suddenly, there was no physical classroom to work with, no campus interaction to be done. There was only a computer in front of me, student profile pictures on

the screen and especially at first, silence coming from the side of the students. We were all in shock, some had stage fright (including myself) and others felt lost with the lack of visual stimulation. The first few weeks passed in a bit of a blur and were accompanied by huge amounts of stress, anxiety, frustration, and fear. After the dust settled, and the new learning environment started to make itself clear, I started to actively search for ways to get back to my students. Immediacy and a real urgency to get to answers and solutions quickly became the order of the day. I could not rely on my own trial and error way of doing things. As a teacher and a trainer, I felt an immense sense of responsibility but at the same time, a sense of dread that people may look to me to help out when I was as lost at sea as everyone else.

Reflective Pandemic Mode

I started to examine all the mechanisms that I used with my students in the physical teaching environment and looked for ways to recreate them. Instead of finding the answers I needed from within, I looked at all the other resources that are available to us. I was amazed and humbled by the absolute volume of resources that we have at our virtual and literal fingertips :)

First of all, I turned to the internet, and started looking for training sessions that would help me; these were also thankfully provided by the university's Teaching and Learning Centre. These helped immensely in the beginning, to help navigate through the mine field that online teaching can look like at the start. They also helped me to get back to my students.

I also sought out training courses and found the confidence and the time to complete a Training for Trainers Course from TESOL international. This helped me improve my reflection and analytical skills when it comes to being a teacher and a trainer, and at the same time, reminded me what it was like to be a student and showed me the true reality of online learning. I believe that this not only helped me improve my training abilities, but also helped me develop a newfound awareness of the struggles facing online learners.

Another way that I found confidence, was by preparing workshops for others. I had always thought of this as a way to share what I knew, almost like a one directional flow of information, but I realised that it was also a very effective way to understand concepts or topics better. Actively seeking answers to burning questions (that I would never even have considered to be important pre-pandemic), utilising the answers to them, paired with some practice of them in the 'classroom' and/or the courses as a whole, all helped me to internalise subjects better and then prepare material for others. Preparing a quick tips video on being yourself online and holding a workshop looking at how a lesson can flow in an online environment really made me analyse and dissect the processes involved in these topics. This analysis and dissection helped me gain insight into these areas which I then felt confident enough to share with others. In these teaching resources, I was able to show that your personality and teaching style need to come through online, and that using jokes, showing empathy and utilising your communication style are all areas that can be exploited. Even the way messages are worded, materials are designed, and mannerisms are expressed contribute to your online personality. Making use of

communication channels with students is an invaluable part of online education and providing some kind of summary of a week's lessons can act as a way to reinforce what you did, but at the same time provide extra language practice and just serve as a memory device for students who are struggling to keep up with the demands of multiple courses. It's also a way to maintain visibility with students. You are not lost in the sea of courses.

Preparing workshops with other trainers and teachers also helped me to develop. As the saying goes, two heads are better than one, especially when you have absolutely brilliant and amazingly enthusiastic people by your side. One area that I looked at with another trainer was the way that lessons are staged. The way we start, refocus, and end our classes affects the attention and dare I say performance of our learners (and ourselves). We gave a workshop on this topic at the beginning of this last academic year, which once again really helped me focus on the topic in a more analytical way. However, even since then, my thoughts on the importance of this through utilizing the methods we presented have increased dramatically. There is the old saying, starting is half the battle. How you start affects the rest of the journey. If our actions are more effective than what we use, then the way we start is crucial. Students are joining lessons after coming in from other courses and they may not be in the best frame of mind to start straight away, so something to draw them in is going to affect their motivation and performance. Music is a great way to transition into the class, as well as being a way to relax half-way through, too. There are many different types of warm up activities that can be done from simple pictures, quotes, pronunciation, even a 'how are you?' table can work. The important thing is to ease into the class slowly. If we were in class, students would come in, sit down, have a little chat, get comfy, get their books out and then be ready to join in. We should be able to offer them the same opportunity online.

In addition to these resources, I also grew a lot thanks to my involvement in other teachers' professional development endeavours. Working closely with other teachers and witnessing their insights and reflections on their online journeys provided much food for thought for me and my own approach in the classroom. The areas they identified as research topics or as issues to be addressed in their teaching opened my eyes to different possibilities online. For instance, learning to tolerate and even encourage moments of silence and allow thinking time was one area that I have definitely benefitted from. Different approaches to engaging the students, giving feedback on their work, and using metaphors to understand people's perceptions are other areas that I have become more enriched by thanks to the efforts of the teachers that I am paired with. Also, even just witnessing their level of commitment and responsibility to their students has been inspiring and motivating.

The last resource that I have turned to much more than before is my students and what they are feeling. I have constantly sought feedback from my students both on their online experience and in their lives in general and have been encouraged and enlightened by their willingness to respond. The discussion board tool has been a way to get back to my students and try to understand them on a deeper level than the classroom can provide. It has helped me

understand what they expect from a class and the limitations that may stop them from showing up or participating. With my students, each week I have posted a question on our class discussion board, and many students although they do not have to, write a comment. In one such post, I asked my students the question: 'what are the reasons why some people do not attend class?' I had a large number of students offer their ideas on this topic, and surprisingly I noticed that students who were not regularly attending were answering, too. One student in particular, caught my eye, as he had been in my class in the first term and had attended quite regularly but was not doing so this term as much. He explained that he felt that he could not express himself online and felt that if he did not turn up, no-one would really notice. This was a real eye opener for me because I realised that maybe I did not acknowledge everyone in the class, and I should somehow do that. I wrote to him after reading his answer and told him that I did miss him when he was not there, and the class was not the same without him. I felt like if we had been in the class and I saw that he was having problems, I would go next to him and give him a pep talk. I realised that it was something we also need to do online. It may be more difficult to identify who needs them, but we should develop different methods to try and find out.

By identifying and utilising these areas, I have gradually got my confidence back. It has taken a while, but after being thrown in at the deep end and initially trying to simply stay afloat, I am now able to survive and even include a few extras to my lessons. I have added many new items to my teaching repertoire; things which I will continue to use once back in the classroom.

The pandemic has taught us to seek out answers and look for different ways of doing things. It has proved to us that we are capable of learning new things and doing so makes us stronger, wiser and more motivated.

Epilogue:

After looking around frantically and initially seeing nothing, shapes start to appear all around me. As I look at them more closely, I realise that I am actually surrounded by life rafts. They appear in many forms: the internet, online courses, fellow trainers, fellow teachers and of course students. They had been there all along; I had just never really saw them for all that they were.

Reference:

Stevick, E. W. (1980). Teaching languages: A way and ways. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.