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Learning From Our Limits: Lessons to Hold Tight

KARA B. DOUMA

It is a cold, sunny day, early in the morning. Students remain in a hybrid schedule to maintain social distancing guidelines. The hallways of the school are quiet. I walk into an English language arts classroom and take a seat. I can see students on the screen while a few are in-person. The screen reveals some cameras turned on, while others remain off. The chat box is already scrolling with messages about the lesson that day. Turning my head, a student looks at me. I smile then quickly realize they cannot see the smile behind my mask. I wave my hand instead. It is in these moments I am reminded of how hard this is for everyone.

Teachers and students rely on human connection, including all of the routines that foster this ideal, such as conferring with chairs next to each other, seeing each face at a glance, and the nature of teaching that involves gestures and physical expression. The loss of the typical and preferred school day and the addition of learning in this new way—masked, distanced, and in a hybrid form—are a challenge. Such challenges teach us lessons along the way that we may want to hold tight. Turbulent times, when we need the space to learn in a new and more complicated way, are an especially good occasion to take a closer look at our priorities.

Lessons we may take with us include: learning from our limits, setting priorities across the curriculum, partnering with students for content, and making assessments more meaningful. Each of these lessons respects the student-teacher relationship by making space for it. Let's turn now to these core lessons, beginning with knowing and learning from our limits.

Know and Learn From Our Limits

The experience of a pandemic creates a more pressing need to attend to our personal limits. In *Risk. Fail. Rise. A Teacher's Guide to Learning from Mistakes*, M. Colleen Cruz takes the reader through a series of studies and explanations with significant insight into the reasons teachers make mistakes along with the types of mistakes that are made. One reason a teacher, or anyone for that matter, may make a mistake is a lack of self-care: for instance, not enough sleep. In the section "Martyrs Make More Mistakes," Cruz explains why self-care is essential. Even more compelling, Cruz invites teachers to think about their "limited energy and the level and depth of energy it takes to try something new, be creative, or take a pedagogical risk. . . . When you do not prioritize your own health, rest, and happiness, you are less likely to have the energy to take the sort of risks that lead to our aha moments or stretch mistakes" (34). During this world health crisis, teachers are routinely being asked to try new things and be creative to find solutions to varying issues; more than ever before, teachers need time for self-care to maintain a higher level of energy.

In this hybrid environment, teachers talk about the extensive workload, especially surrounding preparation for virtual instruction. While stakeholders praise their work, it is still work that calls on educators to perform at a more intense level, consuming additional time and attention. In response, professional learning communities band together to systematically create and share resources. Recognizing mistakes or imperfection as typical and acceptable in

this environment is an added benefit. For instance, the prerecorded lesson will not be perfect and will only be recorded once with a degree of human error. Teachers also feel more confident that most pieces of writing or reading reflection do not have to be graded. Letting go of certain aspects of traditional instruction frees teachers from extenuating time constraints. It is okay to set emails to an away message in the evenings to get enough rest, exercise, and proper nutrition while decreasing the chance for mistakes and allowing everyone to tackle the next day with the attention and focus that all of our students deserve. By far, knowing our limits and how to have a better life/work balance benefits everyone.

Additional ways to set limits include focusing on priority standards, partnering with students for content, and reframing our needs to use assessment as learning. With these adjustments, teachers more comfortably make space for what matters most when it comes to setting limits in an effort to maintain the energy necessary for optimal teaching.

Priority Standards

Teaching is demanding. From kindergarten through high school, the English language arts standards splinter across various lifelong and necessary skills to be successful in any future endeavor. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening encompass what makes people successful across all tasks. The standards also spiral for repeated exposure in each grade with deepening complexity. Therefore, this discussion is applicable to all teachers of reading and writing across grade levels.

While English language arts teachers take responsibility for these standards, they are felt by all students and teachers across the curriculum. After a closer look, there are clear priorities in the standards that serve as the beacon for others to stream in their light.

Distilling standards down to the key elements is a way to focus instructional planning. Especially in the year of hybrid learning and pandemic struggle, students need clear, specific focus and direction. Sources, such as *Achieve the Core 2020-2021 Priority Instructional Content*, make recommendations for suggested priority standards and include the rationale as to the selection. Let us turn to an example of deciphering between such standards. In reading, citing textual evidence to support an analysis is a good illustration of a priority standard since it is necessary to advance an argument or response across text types. In comparison, analysis of different character points of view is not evident across the English language arts curriculum. Therefore, using text evidence to prove a point is arguably a priority standard since it is a thread that exists across tasks. Without reference back to the text or use of text evidence, readers will struggle with other standards such as the analysis of different character points of view.

As addressed above, there is reasonable evidence to support a move to prioritize standards by identifying the top two to three in each major area, such as reading and writing, then linking assessments to measure progress on these few standards throughout the school year. The result is focused instruction with only a few standards to continually teach in and assess. The few, selected priority standards should be studied for a continued, coordinated, and nuanced approach to instruction in the future.

Students as Partners for Content

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute conducted a recent study by Tyner and Kabourek that investigates the mastery of reading comprehension. It poses challenges to the content area of English language arts, which typically emphasizes the strengthening of student comprehension,

teaching the associated skills such as identifying themes or analyzing the author's craft. Ultimately, this early childhood longitudinal study argues that content areas, such as social studies, foster comprehension at a higher rate than literacy classes. Tyner and Kabourek explain how “a small army of cognitive psychologists, analysts, and educators has long cast doubt on the view that reading is a discrete skill that can be mastered independently from acquiring knowledge. To these contrarians, a focus on academic *content*—not generalized reading skills and strategies—will equip students with the background knowledge they need to comprehend all sorts of texts and make them truly literate” (Tyner and Kabourek). A similar argument that extends beyond early childhood education comes from Wexler who claims throughout *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America's Broken Education System and How to Fix It* that knowledge is what is holding students back from acquiring the skills they need to be successful. As English language arts/literacy tends to teach skills over content, the thoughtful approach of increasingly looking to students to bring the content of their reading and writing is appropriate; the core purpose of English language arts class is to teach students how to improve their reading and writing abilities.

To further support the point that teachers of English do not only teach content and tend to focus more on the skills involved, Donald M. Murray argues that “Our students should be teaching us the subject while we are teaching them to write” (96). Moving away from the traditional assignments that originate with the teacher, such as each student writing a five-paragraph essay on the symbolism of the plant in *A Raisin in the Sun* is critical. If our goal is for students to live as authentic readers and writers in the real world, they “need to know how to

collect their own information and connect it so that they can develop their own ideas out of their own material in answer to their own needs” (Murray 12). Shifting expectations, the prerequisite of a good writer is one who clearly demonstrates their developing authority on the content under study. With an authentic workshop approach, teachers use mentor texts and their own writing experience to teach the skills students need to acquire. The students select the content. Imagine the depth of student learning when the content they read and write about either extends what they are already learning in their content area classes or what they are developing as their own expertise. For example, a student may be learning about World War II in history class and decide to read informational texts in English class on the topic to deepen their comprehension of this content. The student may then decide to write about their studies in the area through an argumentative essay. The more the student knows about the content they are writing about, the greater the opportunity for the English teacher to work with the student to strengthen their writing skills.

Ideally in writing, students take the lead role of writer and work from a place of authority as to the information or content they study. To effectively write, students need to really know, and arguably care about the content they are writing about. If students are given the opportunity to write and read about the content they care most about, it gives the teacher the ability to truly focus on teaching skills. The reading and writing students do in English language arts can certainly originate from their knowledge, interests, and academic study. Students should be given frequent invitations to bring the content to class if they are to more drastically improve upon their skills in reading and writing.

Assessment as Learning

Lorna M. Earl defines assessment of, for, and as learning. According to Earl, assessment of learning is summative and meant to report out on the student's progress on the grade-level standards, assessment for learning is formative, meant to inform the design of instruction for students, and assessment as learning serves to both invite students to contribute to assessment design and position students as their own assessor. The purpose of assessment as learning is for students' "self-monitoring, self-correction or adjustment" of their learning to meet personal goals and standards (Earl 26). The traditional teacher-generated paper topics and checkpoints for homework are sidestepped. As suggested above, if students have the choice to bring the content, in other words, to decide what topics they want to read and write about, it is appropriate that assessment as learning encompasses what they do most.

To better illustrate this point, a student in third grade may engage in a year-long study of bugs. Considering the student would be the expert on the topic of bugs, since the teacher would not be able to study bugs for a year to learn all that the student did, it would empower the student to make decisions about what their next reading would be, what questions are left unanswered, and what type of writing project would help them move forward in their understanding of bugs. For instance, an infographic instead of an argumentative writing might benefit the student more if they are attempting to draw clear comparisons between different types of bugs. As students become the expert on their topic, "the instructor responds to the student's response and to the student's suggestions for improvement" (Murray 148). This reasoning values learner independence; students need to apprentice as the primary evaluator and be able to closely study their strengths with a plan to move forward. In this line of thinking, students

learn "the solutions to . . . problems. . . come from points of strength" (Murray 59). Students serve as the authority on their work by recognizing the strong parts and working to improve the rest of the piece in a similar fashion. Students grow more confident from building on their strengths, successes, and interests.

Learning From Our Limits

While education is always changing, learning from a few meaningful lessons in an effort to set limits is worth noting. To summarize, a shift to greater student independence in learning, thus a reliance on student knowledge in the English language arts classroom intertwined with a commitment to assessment as learning, embraces a responsive, student-centered model. Another lesson is to prioritize, then limit the standards, which helps to target instruction while reducing overload. Lastly, modeling self-care for students is valuable lifelong learning while also decreasing error and increasing energy in instructional practice. The need to know and learn from our limits is a lesson to hold tight.

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