

Reclaiming Our Time During a Pandemic

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When you wake up bone-tired and your first thought is “thank goodness it’s Friday,” only to realize a moment later that it’s Tuesday... you know it’s going to be a long week. When this happens every week, what does that make it? A long month? A long year?

I know I’m not the only teacher experiencing this. No matter what model your school is currently operating under, everything feels unsustainable right now. When I talk to teachers all over the state, it’s variations on this theme: everyone is overworked, scrambling to adjust to the current mode of business, worried about their students and communities. Even those of us who feel we’re starting to get the hang of teaching in a pandemic are still spending an outrageous number of hours retooling lessons and doubting our teacher instincts, which seem to be misfiring and in desperate need of recalibration.

It has been said – and I’ve been one of the ones doing the saying – that all teachers are feeling like first year teachers again this year. The more I think about it, the more I think that phrase does a disservice to this year’s cohort of new teachers. After all, they are figuring out how to teach during a pandemic right along with us, *and* they’re overcoming all of the hurdles faced during the first year of teaching.

When I was a first-year teacher, I found myself solidly in the category of the teacher who was doing too much. I worked ridiculous hours putting together materials and resources that had to be perfect in every way. They had to be beautifully designed yet condensed to use as little paper as possible, while still being user-friendly and eye-catching enough for other teachers on social media. Oh, and students had to learn from it.

I felt like I was putting everything I had into my classroom, and I didn’t know how to depersonalize myself from the way my students received it all. I remember the deep hurt I felt when a student complained that I always gave them black-and-white copies, unlike another teacher who sprang for color ink. I remember the despair when I stayed up all night making a cute, clever material that had to be laminated and painstakingly cut out, only to have a few disengaged 6th graders destroy it the very next day. I was exhausted and demoralized, on the verge of teacher burnout only a few months into my career.

In my first teaching job, I was inventing everything from scratch, and I was doing it alone. I was creating the curriculum as I taught it, gathering my own materials and resources, and planning and implementing the entire thing without much of any outside help or feedback. To many teachers currently teaching during the pandemic, this might feel very familiar. I’m in a better position now, where I’ve got a great team and a lot of support. We collaborate on everything, and I can rely on my teammates. But even with that support, I’m working hours that aren’t too far off from my first year, trying to make online learning more interesting, more collaborative for students, more effective. And with my growing familiarity with online tools, I’m even trying to make it more visually appealing.

Just like my first year of teaching, I find myself working at an unsustainable pace. I can feel the fatigue creeping in from the periphery of my vision, making me short-tempered with my loved ones and robbing me of my patience with my students. Luckily, I know more now than I did as a first-year teacher, and I'm reminding myself of a rule I made way back when I was finally learning to survive.

For every task on my to-do list, I ask myself: does this increase the relationships, engagement, or rigor in my classroom? If it doesn't do at least one of those three things, then I don't actually need to do it.

From my home office (the one I hastily redecorated to make sure my students would get a better video experience from my teaching), in the wee hours before I finally collapse into bed, I offer you, my fellow pandemic teachers, this metric by which to measure your own task and time management. Who does that task serve? Does it increase relationships, engagement, or rigor?

If it doesn't, is it worth your time and energy? Your mental and emotional health? Your disengagement from your family and your hobbies?

I'm making a promise right now to recommit myself to this strict standard for the things that get my attention. If you're currently feeling exhausted and overworked, I encourage you to commit to this with me. Now is always the right moment to reclaiming a work-life balance.

Now what day is it again?