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Fear, Hope and Making the Best of It: reflections on working in initial teacher education under lockdown

HELEN TRELFORD

ABSTRACT This article illuminates and reflects on the vicissitudes of home learning and online teaching. It focuses on challenges which confronted those whose work on initial teacher education courses was disrupted by the pandemic and subsequent lockdown. It underlines the value of creative writing and empathetic relating as mainstays of the post-viral recovery.

For me, becoming a teacher was like putting on special glasses that recast my way of seeing the world. Yes, I can still relax out of work, but I have never managed to just leave my job at the door, and I am sure friends would accuse me of 'banging on' about education. The nature of childhood, the ways that learning happens and the role of schools in society are threads now woven through my thinking, and they frequently intersect with everyday life. These pervasive themes have been amplified during the months of lockdown, where, for me, as for so many others, the boundaries between work and home and between the roles of teacher and parent have been removed. I have allowed this piece of writing to develop over the course of the lockdown. It wanders through ideas in a way which I think reflects the boundary-less nature of the last few months.

The Early Days

On the first day of school closure, my son and I whittled a spoon. I stopped work at lunchtime and began what I determined would be a glorious afternoon of holistic home education. We abandoned our work and went out to the shed to find a suitable piece of pine. An hour and a half of whittling later, we had something vaguely spoon-shaped, a picture of which I proudly posted on my

social media. See what an enlightened mother and educator I am? This is what learning looks like!

What the picture did not reveal was that, about an hour into the whittling, my son got fed up and wandered off to work on 360s and round-offs on the lawn. I continued the excruciating job of carving the bowl of the spoon. We did not sweep up the wood shavings. For weeks, we noticed nesting blackbirds flying in to collect the little curls.

Really, I should have trusted him to find his own pace, his own fascinations. Why had I been seized with this urge to take charge and overtly educate? Well, partly perhaps because of the novelty of the situation; this was before we knew the toll that COVID-19 would take and how long it would go on for. Besides, I certainly was not the only parent out there grandstanding the home learning. Pretty soon, Facebook and Instagram filled with pictures of home-made loaves of bread, collages, wormeries … the list went on. Evidence of wonderful experiences, without a doubt, and lucky for those children of parents with the time and resources to make them happen.

With admirable speed and after only one stressful day of trying to work to a near-constant soundtrack of 'I'm bored, I'm hungry', my son's school began to provide a wealth of engaging and accessible online learning. As well as this, his own drive to learn independently – to explore and try things out – which had been so pronounced when he was much younger, returned. He completed intricate drawings of gods of the ancient world and hatched a plan to make a pneumatic hand. This necessitated the deconstruction of most of the biros in the house. One day, he told me what he had found out about living under Nazi occupation, as his great-grandmother had experienced during the Second World War.

Of course, some days were more challenging. Motivation was not always so easy to come by. Friends and family were missed and the day-to-day niggles of family life were at times intensified by our constant proximity.

Conversations with my PGCE students revealed that, for many, the early days of lockdown were particularly unsettling. Embarked on placements, they had been pulled out of school suddenly and with little opportunity to say goodbye to the children and mentors with whom they had formed bonds. They endured eight nervous days from the cessation of their placements to the Department for Education's announcement enabling initial teacher education providers to make their judgements. These were based on assessments the students had already completed and on their trajectory towards meeting the Teachers' Standards (Department for Education, 2011). During this time, my colleagues and I worked with limited information to provide our students with reassurance and maintain their morale.

Adapting

Our Primary PGCE course had to change rapidly in the lockdown. Faced with the prospect of missing out on their final placement, students began working

from home on a range of directed and self-selected tasks, all with the aim of developing their understanding of subject and pedagogy. Many students were able to maintain a sense of purpose by continuing to plan work for their placement schools. As tutors, we worked quickly to translate hands-on and often collaborative learning experiences into something that the students could engage with and benefit from at home. This was by no means straightforward. We quickly realised that attempts simply to transfer traditional, classroom-based approaches to online teaching all too easily resulted in a lowering of the quality of the learner experience. As Hodges et al (2020) explain, it can take months to develop and fine-tune online learning programmes. The results of such efforts are a far cry from what might best be described as 'emergency remote teaching'. Maintaining meaningful contact and a sense of community emerged as high priorities. This meant finding ways for students to work collaboratively online.

My own online teaching got off to a bumpy start. For some time prior to the pandemic, I had been studiously ignoring the potential of technology to enhance my teaching. I have a history of losing files, not being able to get the sound to work and other information-technology-related ineptitude. During my first attempt at a webinar, the students turned off their cameras in a bid to improve a shaky connection. I quickly realised how much I rely on learner feedback and on the ability to 'read' the room. Normally, I have a sense of when students need to pause to think, when they are ready for me to move on more quickly, or when they just do not get it. However, a month into online teaching, I was still missing what I can best describe as teacher agility. I wanted to be able to change the learning space during a session, to literally bring different groups of learners together to support and develop the flow of ideas. More tech-savvy colleagues told me that there were solutions to this, but when they first started talking about break-out rooms, Google Classroom and padlets, I experienced what felt like a fight or flight reflex. According to Boettcher and Conrad (2016), this is entirely normal. 'Breathe! Breathe! You can do this!' repeated the voice in my head.

Although new and daunting to me, remote teaching has been going on in far-flung corners of the globe for many years. When I first heard that we would be working from home, a memory came to me of an old report I had seen on *John Craven's Newsround* or maybe *Blue Peter* about the Falklands Telephone Teaching Service. A little investigating told me that, 40 years on, the service still provides remote learning for the children of the islands. Another pioneer in the field was Adelaide Miethke. In 1951, she introduced the first School of the Air. Lessons were broadcast via two-way radio to children in isolated areas of Australia. This, too, is still running today. I wonder what this way of learning feels like? What could these past masters of remote teaching tell us about how to form a bond with our pupils and students in spite of the distance between us?

With online – or at least blended – learning likely to remain a feature of both the school and university experience in the coming months, we teachers will need to draw on sources of expertise, wherever they are to be found. We may also need to adjust our conceptions of what 'good' learning looks like. This

may be difficult, for such notions are likely internalised. Initial teacher education prospectuses, like those of primary schools, are packed with glossy photographs of social-constructivist learning in action. These tableaux call attention to the eye contact and physical proximity of the subjects: student teachers in rapt conversation with their peers and tutors; small groups of children in huddles, pointing at and touching artefacts; mentors and students sitting face-to-face in earnest discussion. By propagating such images, institutions herald the quality of the learning experience. As teachers, we may need support and training in the use of digital platforms to make good on this promise of contact and collaboration.

When children return to school, it will be essential to plan and teach with a deep understanding of their needs. The skills of observation, listening, empathy and creativity, combined with an appreciation of the toll the pandemic has had on mental health, will be vital. Evidence has already been collected which reflects this toll (Longfield, 2020). This suggests that the role of teachers in supporting children's mental health will be particularly important in the coming months. To do so effectively, teachers will need to notice and find ways to address children's fears. This will be difficult because children may have internalised their anxiety (Hurley, 2019) and kept their worries to themselves.

Reflecting on my own childhood, and in conversations with my mum, I have been thinking about how easily dramatic events can seed such hidden worries. For me, the most palpable memory of carrying an unspoken fear was during the early part of the AIDS crisis. The tombstone image from the 1980s public information film, with John Hurt's 'Don't Die of Ignorance' voice-over, is etched on my brain. Fear was compounded by a lack of understanding as rumours spread in the playground: 'You can catch it from toilet seats'.

My mum provided the following recollections of her own childhood:

> Another thing that was frightening was the Great Floods of 1953. I remember one day I was at home and my mum was doing the ironing. The doorbell rang and I heard my mum talking to the person at the door, and then she got her purse and gave them some money. That was strange. I knew that we were hard up. I asked my mum why she had given the person the money and she explained that there had been terrible floods and that the people who had lost their homes and possessions needed money to help them. I remember that I went straight outside to look up and down the street to work out which way the water would come to our house.
>
> I didn't tell my mum that I was frightened. Children still used to pray then, which I think was a lot of to do with the war and the army chaplains. Instead of bothering your parents with worries, you talked to God.

And, discussing myxomatosis:

> There wasn't a lot of information but there was a lot of worry because we didn't know if it could be passed from animals to

humans. My mum told me that under no circumstances should I eat blackberries when I was out playing. Well, one day, I did. I ate loads! So many that when I got home I was sick and it was all full of blackberries. I was so frightened and also frightened that my mum would find out.

Writing

These memories were recalled with a sharp immediacy that belied the many years since the experiences occurred. Such is the vividness of memory that in an instant we cast ourselves back to those moments of fear. As a teacher, I find this realisation helpful, as I know there are ways to help children (or, in my case, to help beginner teachers to help children) manage anxieties. The research of Pennebaker (1997) points to the therapeutic power of expressive writing to improve both mental and physical health. As a teacher who writes, I feel I can attest to those benefits. The realisation that what children write at school does not always have to be shared or fed back on to be of value has also influenced my thinking.

Several weeks into lockdown, I attended the first Zoom session of the University of East Anglia's (UEA's) Writing Teachers group. All the members are busy teachers. We turn up to the monthly sessions when work and life allow. Using the remote format meant that lapsed members could once again come together, and so there were a few squeaks of delight as former faces appeared in their little boxes on-screen. Some people drifted in late, spilling out apologies: 'I was washing all the maths resources because that's a thing now, isn't it?' We talked and laughed and wrote, and, of course, COVID-19 and the ways that it was affecting our lives as teachers was the main concern. We grabbed the bull by the horns and wrote 'A–Zs of Lockdown'. People shared intimate and often funny details of domestic life – their fears and frustrations. I think we all felt better afterwards.

A week or two after the session, I talked to the session leader about the way that the writing about lockdown had really flowed. This led to some reflection on the value of writing about shared 0or parallel experiences. In my own role as a teacher educator, I know that a useful starting point for beginner teachers is to get back in touch with what it felt like to be a child at school. Thinking about the next cohort of PGCE students, who may not meet in person in the first weeks of the course (depending on the level of restrictions faced), it seems to me that writing about common experiences, such as lunchtime, school uniform or physical education, might go some way to facilitate this. If such writing is shared, it might help create a bond between students and their peers and tutors.

When reflecting on some of my own online teaching, I was struck again by the way that writing can help us out of tight corners and allow us to meet head-on the things that are difficult. One of the more well-received remote learning opportunities that I have offered my students in the past weeks was an

online poetry session. I invited students to engage with different forms of poetry and to use published poems as a framework for their own writing. Although no theme was suggested, many students depicted details from their lives in lockdown, and their thoughts and feelings about what was happening. Several mentioned that getting their feelings out in writing had been helpful. It had allowed them to appreciate the role that poetry might play in the classroom. Some wanted to share their work, others just to reflect on the experience of writing.

The poems produced by the students quietly document experiences that are personal and yet which others can relate to. Here is an example:

> *Staying Home* (inspired by 'Little Bit of Food' by Joseph Coelho)
>
> A little bit of time,
> a little time to wait,
> in my mind,
> I'll create.
> A little bit of art,
> a little art to show,
> I'm doing my part,
> on my own.
> A little bit of fear,
> a little fear for us,
> For those who're dear
> We must trust.
> A little bit of food,
> A little food to last,
> Slowly chewed
> Until this has passed.
> A little bit of time,
> a little time to wait,
> in my mind,
> I'll create. (Joe Cracknell, UEA Primary PGCE 2019/20)

The students told me that they found writing poetry helpful for their own development and that they saw poetry as a valuable pursuit for children. As Kate Clanchy acknowledges, 'Poetry makes children feel important, that they're heard' (O'Kelly, 2019), and what could be more urgent at a time of uncertainty?

These writing-related online experiences gave me my first taste of what really successful remote practice might feel like. There was the feeling of community and collaboration that I had worried would be so difficult to achieve over a digital platform. While I gradually began to find my feet, my students were doing the same. During our biweekly online tutorials, I was struck time and time again by their continued motivation and good humour. One student told me about the routine she had established for her self-directed learning, and we laughed at the fact she had been doing her maths and English

in the mornings. How quickly these arbitrary conventions of school take hold of our thinking!

Despite the limitations imposed by COVID-19, our students showed great determination to make the most of the remaining time on the course. Even right at the end, when they were exhausted and ready for a break, many of them voluntarily contributed to the wider community through a Norfolk County Council project to support families to engage in activities over the summer months.

This spirit of determination to make a difference to children's lives has also been evident in many of the candidates we have interviewed for next year's PGCE course. In spite of the criticism directed at teachers and schools by some during the pandemic, candidate after candidate (some first apologising for their lockdown haircuts) shared their excitement about becoming a teacher and the opportunity to positively influence children's lives.

Looking Ahead

In the year to come, my colleagues and I will need to provide additional support to our newly qualified teachers. With less in-school experience than they had expected to have, some new teachers will be feeling nervous about going into the classroom. We must also support those who have not yet secured a position. Teaching vacancies are down locally. Consultation with colleagues in other parts of the country suggests that this is a national trend. At the same time, the Department for Education (2020) reports a 12% increase on last year in applications to initial teacher education courses. It seems inevitable that the impact of these consequences of the pandemic will be felt not just this September but in the years to come.

During the lockdown, we have made it a priority to gather feedback from our students about the different approaches to remote learning we have used. By knowing what they found valuable, accessible and relevant, we have equipped ourselves with a starting point for the planning of meaningful learning experiences for next year's cohort. Teaching in the new academic year will be online, to begin with at least. I know that I will spend a good proportion of the coming months improving my own remote teaching skills.

The question of how teachers can do what is 'right' for children is never far from my thoughts. Considering my son's learning, noticing his persistence and inventiveness, and seeing his pride in the things he achieved independently were all useful reminders of the benefits of stepping back from a heavily teacher-led approach. Looking back on my own childhood and engaging with memories has provided me with some insight into what children may be experiencing now. Reflecting on childhood experiences already forms part of the UEA's PGCE course. I can see the potential for such an approach to be used more widely.

An acknowledgement of the effects of lockdown on children's mental health, combined with an awareness of the range of experiences to which they

may have been subject in the past few months, should compel practitioners to view with caution and resist calls for rapid 'catch-up'. During the lockdown, Carpenter and Carpenter made just such an acknowledgement in their proposal for 'A Recovery Curriculum'. They describe a systematic holistic approach to the curriculum: 'Each school must fill it with the content they believe is best for the children of their school community' (Carpenter & Carpenter, 2020, p. 4).

Carpenter and Carpenter's (2020) document appears to have been very well received, and is being shared and cited online by teachers and educationalists. However, there is also a danger that their principled approach could be watered down or misunderstood. Subscribers to the Twinkl website can now access a 'Recovery Curriculum Key Performance Indicator Tracker for Maths'.[1] Here, writ large, is the tension in an education system that prioritises high-stakes testing and inspection. The postponement of the introduction of statutory baseline assessment in Reception (due in no small part to the More Than a Score campaign) is hugely welcome. However, it will be for brave heads and empathetic teachers to keep children's health and well-being at the heart of their practice when Ofsted inspections begin again in January (Spielman, 2020) and the Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 SATs, the Year 1 phonics screening, and the Year 4 multiplication and tables tests loom back into view.

Finally, I think it important to remember that while our efforts are focused on our children and students, we need also to take time to look after ourselves and our colleagues. In that way, we will remain healthy and motivated to continue through the challenges ahead.

Note

[1] https://www.twinkl.co.uk/resources/recovery-curriculum-all-stages

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HELEN TRELFORD is a Lecturer in Primary Education at the University of East Anglia, teaching mainly on the Primary PGCE course. Before taking up the post, she taught in Reception and Key Stage 1. *Correspondence*: h.trelford@uea.ac.uk