Calls With My Students: Learning on the Periphery of a Harmful Institution

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2021-12-27

There are moments where I want to say things like "I don't understand why people hate teaching online," but when I start that sentence, I remember all of the reasons why *I* find it abhorrent. It's all related to the *forced* feeling of school: maintaining strict attendance policies, having to continue with a curriculum that never made sense in the first place, being required to *grade* kids for simply doing their best in a shitty situation, and the lack of care that many of my colleagues put into it.

And when I'm saying "care," I mean the actual ability to *give a shit* about what matters most: people.

The amount of time they spend complaining in the staff WhatsApp group and online meetings while acting like the cops they *really* wanted to be is more draining than anything. I don't care for the complaints about kids not turning their cameras on (in their own homes, on their own computers). I hate the repeated messages about which kid is missing which class. And I really am disgusted by the head of school refusing a bare minimum request to create a 'between class' atmosphere as best we can because "the kids know how to video chat on their own time" and "it shouldn't be our responsibility" to provide that (ignoring that sometimes the 'between class atmosphere' the kids want is to communicate with adults who are outside of their immediate families).

Oh, and I hate it because it's a super useful tool that's being implemented *terribly* because, two years later, everyone's still acting as if we should only be using online spaces temporarily. The ableism of our supposed education system is on full display, and people still refuse to acknowledge it.

But there has been something that I *do* love about teaching online: I love having the last ten to fifteen minutes of a class for kids to just... exist wherever they want to be. Whether that's them getting off Zoom and doing something else, switching to a personal space so they can chat, or just hanging out with me, I didn't care.

All I knew was that these spaces felt... *free.*

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I don't like teaching online for the full class time because no one has the focus for that, not even myself. But also, teachers *rarely*, if ever, use the whole class time during in-person school.

I mean, I've literally listened to my head of school talk about how he'd start class with a story based in a lie to get the kids' attention, dragging it on for at least ten minutes. He claimed it was because he "can't share too much of himself" with the students because it's "not professional."

Personally, I prefer to start my classes off with honesty. Sometimes it's a story about myself that they reminded me of, sometimes it's bothering them about things they've been doing, and sometimes it's letting them know that I'm also falling behind because I'm overworked. I don't see the need to lie to the kids to have them be engaged with what I'm saying. I suppose that's why a few of the kids have written feedback for me saying that I seem to be the most *authentic* person they deal with.

Anyway, because I don't want to teach for the full class time, I often give the kids a bit more time to go get snacks or tea and work on the copious amounts of work my colleagues think they need to be doing since they're at home (because, as they claim, we're supposed to "make up" for the "decreased amount of teaching time"). I frequently end classes by telling them to just go outside or open the window for a few minutes; I tell them to just 'get out' of the school mode as much as they can.

But I had a few kids wanting to hang around and just... talk, which I loved. So I left the room open and gave them the additional space to just stick around if they needed to ask questions or if they wanted to talk about... whatever. Sometimes they stuck around to work together on different projects, even for other classes; they occasionally would pick my brain *for* those other classes because they know I have a wide range of interests. Other times, they just stuck around to talk about nothing and everything all at once.

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Honestly, it's in those spaces that I noticed the *most* learning taking place because I saw the kids *trying* to solve the problems they've openly acknowledged, the problems that *they* feel are the most pressing. I saw them trying to figure out how to deal with school while simultaneously feeling that everything they were doing was pointless, telling each other that trying their best was enough and that just getting through the class to get away from it was all they needed to do. I listened to them talk about their fears of "never being able to get a job" because of *one bad grade*, which is something that just highlights so many of the lies around why schools even exist.

I saw one student who tried *so hard* to convince their classmates that high school doesn't matter, telling them that the point was to *crush their spirit.* I listened to them tell everyone about all the ways in which school was designed to hurt them, to make them afraid, to silence them. And I listened to them recount their past experiences in other schools, talking about all the times that their past school *punished* them for their neurodivergence.

And I heard them say that it was *with me*, after *more than a decade* of being in school, that they first felt like a normal person. Like they had someone who *understood* because I was someone who also was dealing with a similar neurodivergence, that I stopped to listen to their concerns, that I stopped to remind them it was okay to just try, that I gave them the space they needed to just *think* and *work through* things.

I heard them say that I was the first teacher, the first adult outside of their family, who would stand up for them and what they needed. And that broke my heart.

It was also during this time that I heard a bunch of girls complain about the persistent misogyny of two teachers. I listened to them talk about how they kept publicly getting yelled at for asking simple questions while they felt like the boys around them could get away with far more. I heard them make the *same complaints* that I had about the *same people* for making sexually

inappropriate and sexist jokes. They told me about how they were constantly being gaslit when they said it made them uncomfortable, how they were told that they "misunderstood" the point of the joke and that they clearly "misheard" what was said.

Another, a queer student, told me how infuriated they were by the constant jokes that were also being made at the expense of gay men. They told me how disgusting they felt going into a class where a teacher had openly said that he "found marriage between two men reprehensible." They wondered how a school could *claim* to be safe when it was clear that some people in power were still willing to abuse those different from themselves.

They all told me I was the *first* person to take them seriously. And of course I did. Because I *saw* the same people they were complaining about make those inappropriate jokes in *whole school assemblies*, and I heard those same people make those sexist jokes in staff meetings.

I heard them badmouth girls who were "too boy-focused," while they ignored the boys who were seeking attention from girls. Hell, I even asked *why* the relationships our students chose to engage in mattered to them, only to be told that we should "make sure that the girls behave."

I still remember one of the first things my boss said to me about how "we have a lot of queer students," but "we should keep them from talking about it too much" because "it makes other people uncomfortable." Though he left it unsaid, it was clear that it made *him* uncomfortable.

But I still would've believed my students even if I hadn't seen all of that.

Because I know how often we, in many cultures, ignore the complaints of children and favour the perspective of adults. I know how often we put their complaints down to being nothing more than whining.

It's why they often have little or no say in their own lives, despite frequently knowing what *is* good for them. It's why *their personal safety* is so frequently overlooked by the (very bigoted) people who claim to care the most, screaming "but what about the children."

It's why children can be forced to endure so much abuse in so many places, regardless of how much spaces "meant for them" claim to care.

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What they learned about me through these moments is that I genuinely *want* to create a community and that I don't think schools can do that (and that I *know* they weren't developed for that purpose).

They learned that I'm actually quite uncomfortable having a title appended to my name, that I think it's better when my students can see me as their equal, that I wish we existed in horizontally organised learning spaces, and that I wish we could get rid of the useless task of grading.

And they started understanding a lot more of my actions in class when they recognised these different aspects of how I think. They recognised that my patience for them in class was genuine, that I wanted them to do their best work on things that mattered to them, that I actually cared about their well-being, and that my (lack of) policies penalising kids for being absent or turning work in late were motivated by my actual convictions and not a desire to "seem cool." (Adorably, this was something they all admitted to thinking at some point.)

They also learned that I, too, was struggling with the misogyny and queerphobia of my colleagues because they saw that I didn't stop them from complaining, that I didn't push them away, and that my facial expressions said almost everything for me from "Of course they'd fucking say that" to "I can't believe they think that's appropriate."

I didn't need to say anything for them to recognise that I also dealt with much of the same frustrations. (Granted, one student also made it clear that *of course* I must be, since they had noticed that all but one of the teachers would very publicly misgender me in English.)

It was probably the first time that I've felt seen and understood in the context of a school, that I felt I could *be more of myself* and not have to mask *everything*.

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Those elements of freedom are the spaces we *should* be searching for. They're not the perfect answers, but they *can* point us in a multitude of directions if we even let them. Those few spaces *finally* enabled me to articulate many of my frustrations with the whole system.

They've shown me *concrete* examples that only bolster my desire to abolish schools and work towards creating safe, *genuinely* inclusive, multi-generational, and authentic learning spaces. It's shown me a *stronger* version of learning that's taking place on the periphery of a system so many people cling to despite it *largely* being composed of flaws and systemic band-aids.

Schools are harmful to everyone's mental health. Everyone who has gone to school has endured some form of trauma, be it direct and as a result of immutable aspects of who they are or indirectly inflicted through pure indoctrination into a racialised capitalist society (that has, for many, also spit them out after grinding them down).

Those of us who continue to work in schools because we seek to mitigate as much harm as is possible on an individual level *also* continue to endure a range of traumatising experiences because *schools do not care about anyone in them.*

I have been the victim of targeted harassment for trying to push for changes that would *improve* the environment for students (which my colleagues *also* supported me in). I have had people outright misgender me, claiming that it would be "too difficult to remember." I have had contracts rescinded because my bosses have latched on to the flimsiest of excuses while simultaneously telling my colleagues that I "was the best teacher they've ever seen" as they demanded to know why my contract wasn't being renewed.

I *hate* what schools *force* me to do. I hate what they *do* to me while *claiming* to care about the people in them, and I *loathe* what they do to kids and how so many view *learning* with disdain because they associate it with a system that was already archaic when it became universally compulsory.

So it is not hyperbole when I say: Abolish them. They are *harmful* for a healthy society, they *do not* promote any form of solidarity, and we *need* to start looking for the freedom that currently only exists at the periphery.

That is where our answers lie.

Not all of them, but many.