“My students needed a more accessible learning experience far earlier than the onset of COVID-19. That I began to provide it for them began as a response to the pandemic, but cannot end with it.”

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“Trial by fire” was an understatement. Six months into student teaching and six weeks into my first U.S. history class, the mayor announced that Boston Public Schools would close to prevent the spread of COVID-19. It’s not how I would’ve chosen to complete my practicum, but I had still learned more than I could have ever imagined.

So when we divided into breakout groups at a staff meeting to share our favorite tip for remote learning, I proudly went first: relax submission standards for assignments and give students multiple ways to complete the work. I joked that I’d typically give students a hard time for texting me their answers, but at this point I’d take anything. How could I expect students to handle the onslaught of information and spend hours at a computer when I could hardly manage myself?

We have to be gentle in this stressful time, I reasoned, and prioritize engagement over procedure.

“Yeah, I do that all year,” my colleague Gina said. That wasn’t the answer I was expecting. I assumed I’d have to defend my stance against a small tide of naysayers warning me that I was lowering expectations, and yet here I found I was actually behind. As a special education teacher, Gina is constantly breaking down barriers to access for students, and this was no different. She challenged my reasoning for this being an emergency-only policy: Why did it matter how the work showed up if that wasn’t part of the assessment? Was I measuring their grasp of the content or was I assessing their ability to submit a Google Doc?

In other words, she said, don’t set up barriers to completion and then be surprised when your grade book starts populating with zeroes. The kids are the ones who suffer for it.

I started taking stock of my shift to remote learning during COVID. What had I held on to and what purpose did it serve? What had I let go of and why was it so easy to lose? I realized that for the most part, I’d taken my original curriculum and just threw everything online, worksheets and all. And as the crisis continued and students struggled, I left behind formatting requirements, hard deadlines, and even
certain assignments. Obviously, they weren’t as integral to learning as I’d originally thought if they could be discarded so easily.

Where previously I’d felt magnanimous about removing a barrier in the face of overwhelming circumstances, now I felt somewhat ashamed. I was grateful but a little embarrassed at having to be pushed to critically reflect on my curriculum and practice. As a teacher-education student at HGSE, it felt like I’d been doing that all year! Why had it taken a public health crisis for me to make this connection now that I was finally in the classroom?

In truth, I had found it much easier to take the path of least resistance, to adopt what was readily available instead of thoughtfully planning for the students in front of me. I’d sworn up and down, as early as my HGSE application and as recently as the night before this staff meeting, that I would do better. My purpose in returning to Boston Public Schools as a teacher was not to inflict the same dehumanizing experiences that I suffered in the very same district. In my stress and in my inexperience, I was desperately clinging to a default that wasn’t justifiable in the first place.

This emergency required me to get down to the bone of what I felt was important for students to know and be able to do. The pandemic didn’t cause the inequities I was seeing in my classroom; it merely exposed the fault lines that were already there. My students needed a more accessible learning experience far earlier than the onset of COVID-19. That I began to provide it for them began as a response to the pandemic, but cannot end with it.

As I head into my first year of teaching, I need to ask myself: is this healing or harmful? Am I starting at the roots with my students’ needs in mind or am I leaning on last-minute adjustments to get through the year? With nothing but more uncertainty ahead and our children’s lives at stake, I need to critically reflect on these questions from the start, continuously, and not just in the face of disaster.

**MELANIE SHEA** is a Dorchester native and graduate of Boston Public Schools (BPS). She returned to BPS this fall to teach history.

Since March 13, the date that still remains on my classroom blackboard and the date when my ninth-grade English classes finished reading *Lord of the Flies*, there has been a huge shift in communication with students and their engagement in school. The relationships that I was able to build and foster over the course of the year with students no longer held the sway that they did when we saw each other every day. The struggle to get students to engage with me in any way, not to mention English class material, was consistent and constant. What I had relied upon, my relationships with the student who came into my classroom every day shouting “GOOD AFTERNOON MS. LOEWALD,” or the student who sent me English memes every other day, was gone and there was a need to pivot, to change the way I was interacting with students, knowing that the things that they needed from me had drastically changed as well.

I transitioned away from teaching them how to write an essay on *Lord of the Flies*, knowing that my students really needed me to think of them as whole people instead of only students, and knowing that I (as a person and not just a teacher) also, at the moment, did not want to grade 80 of those essays.

In collaboration with other ninth-grade English teachers, I switched the curriculum and my “ask” for engagement from students. I had students writing, reading, reflecting, and creating. Since the start of the school year, I have watched as the engagement that had been waning over the weeks leading into this project increased drastically when students were given agency over their learning.

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