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. 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.

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students who I heard almost nothing from. Students who would come into class telling me about their sports teams and how they found a symbol in the reading for homework in February now almost never engaged, even in the nonacademic opportunities that I, sometimes desperately, offered. Individualized emails to them helped occasionally, but not always. At times, the only way to get in touch was by emailing them and including their parents, which I know in some families was an extra stressor in a time of already increased anxiety.

Engagement and meeting students’ needs was my goal over those months and although there were students who I missed and many moments where it did not work, there were also shining bright spots in the midst of that struggle. One of the particularly poignant moments of success was the ability to conference one-on-one with students. There were a few students who really could have benefited from more personalized instruction around their writing over the course of the year. Since I didn’t have 28 students in the room requiring 28 different things from me at the same time, I was granted the space and time to have individual video chats with these students to guide them through the work. I was able to tangibly see students’ confidence and self-advocacy skills grow directly because of those conferences.

Engagement with students will continue to change and adapt in this coming year; I hope that we will have the ability to establish new routines and build new and even stronger relationships so that the engagement that was so lacking and hard to maintain in the spring will be more consistent in the fall. Relationship building while learning remotely is not an easy task, and will be vital to the work that we do as educators to ensure students feel supported, cared for, and engaged as both students and as whole people over the course of the next year and in years to come.

ROBIN LOEWALD, AFTER STUDYING SPANISH AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY AT MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE, CONTINUED TO PURSUE THOSE PASSIONS BY TEACHING ABROAD. GETTING HER MASTER’S AND NOW TEACHING ENGLISH.