

Innovating for Self-Knowledge:  
How Distance Learning Has Helped  
My Students Find Themselves

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After three months of sheltering, all were hungry to connect meaningfully. Suddenly, the latest public murder of a black citizen connected thousands in outrage, the targeted and the conscience-stricken walking together in protest. Fellow Americans must live in the crosshairs of violence carried out by police: murders the rest of us have funded with our taxes and approved by our silence? How do black people living in such a society feel and see the world? How should the rest of us feel and see? What needs to be learned? Books and films responding to questions like these are flying off virtual shelves like never before. Judging by their numbers at protests, a significant portion of white Americans appears to be listening. Who is ready for a next step?

If we are to truly engage the crises of our times—the pandemic, systemic racial injustice, climate violence--one thing is required in common. That one required thing is a deeper kind of learning. All of us must rapidly come to understand how our behavior affects the behavior of viruses, how we influence the climate, and how our lives affect the lives of others who do and don't look like we do. To learn to behave this mindfully of others and our environment--and then actually live that learning--is only possible if we learn in a way many of us have not before. This begins with exploring ourselves in a deeper way than most of us have ever done in school.

Call me an English teacher. More truthfully, the core subject I teach is my students' self-knowledge. My career as a classroom teacher-researcher began before we had state or national

standards to reckon with. Free to experiment in my classroom during the decade before the No Child Left Behind policies gave American schools over to testing, I could follow what continues to inspire me during the pandemic. I find ways to help my students discover who they are, what they value, and how they fit in the world, and celebrate their discoveries as a rich part of my English courses. So far, more than four thousand 15- and 16-year-olds have joined in this research.

By the early 2000s when tests and accountability became the main current, my sophomores and I had prepared ourselves to swim deeper. That's right, sophomores (Greek: wise fools) have been my research partners. Wise fools have taught me to better understand what's "deep" when it comes to learning. In an end-of-year thank-you note, David from the class of 2019 described the course sophomores have inspired me to teach: "Every activity always pushed us to look deeper: deeper into literature, deeper into the world, deeper into ourselves."

#### Designing for Self-Awareness

The work my sophomores and I have done together has taught me to design what I call the *developmental leg* of my courses. I weave and tuck this leg alongside the skill-building academic leg that claims most of our attention today, to build what I call a *two-legged* curriculum. The developmental leg provides me a structure on which I can design a year-long arc of learning experiences to help my students *developmentally*. The goal is to balance their prevalent sense of pointlessness in school with the more satisfying meaning and purpose they seem to find when allowed to learn more fully about themselves and how they fit in the world. The two-legged approach carves out room for me to provide the deeper learning David points to above.

Our year's arc of developmental learning begins with the community interviews of the fall [World Wisdom Project](#), and culminates in the spring presentations of the [Personal Creed Project](#). Three generations of students continue to tell me that these Personal Creed presentations are among the most meaningful classroom experiences of their school lives. After several months of writing comprehensive weekly reflections to delve into their life experience so far, each student shares with their classroom community their personal creed: a set of values their reflections have guided them to discover and embrace. To present one's own creed is rich. To also witness one's classmates doing so is profound. The Creed presentation experience becomes a once-in-a-lifetime shared rite of passage, as classmates discover more about themselves and one another than they ever expected to learn in school. This new self-knowledge nourishes their developmental needs for increasing autonomy and identity awareness. Deeper self-awareness, in turn, prepares students to engage more fully in gaining the academic leg's Common Core skills. In a Creed presentation, a student distills the essence of what the weeks of reflections have helped them discover:

- 1) these are the *most significant influences* that have shaped my life to date;
- 2) these are the *values* reflecting on these influences leads me to embrace;
- 3) these are the *qualities* I'll need to cultivate to live by these values I have chosen;
- 4) this is the *difference* I wish to make in others' lives, as an individual and as a citizen.

Jocelyn, in the class of 2007, described the effect of these presentations: "For most people the path of self-discovery is kept confined to their own voice inside. In the creed [presentation] that voice comes out and talks about not only how you are but why."

Back in March, my sophomores and I were preparing to commence these presentations when a pandemic came out of nowhere, cancelling face-to-face classes for the year. Distance learning promised only to hinder this deeper approach. I was more than a bit concerned. Would

the richest classroom experience of my career and many former students' lives become toothless on a flat screen?

In normal years we create a schedule. Over a five-week period presenters one by one come from their desks to the screen with slides, video, various kinds of original artwork and performance. They bring songs, poetry, dance, music, and deliver presentations like few anywhere have experienced, a pageant of self-discovery unfolding in the classroom. But now, presenting face-to-face was out of the question. With distance learning, our only option was to rely purely on technology. How, I wondered as we ramped up to the presentations, can retreating from live classroom to flat screen possibly *not* detract from the personal power of this experience?

#### A New Platform

In the weeks both sides of spring break, sophomores of the class of 2022 gave the first Zoom Creed presentations. To my astonishment, the Zoom platform made the experience categorically *more personal than ever*.

Delivering presentations with unprecedented clarity and focus over the following weeks, these young people demonstrated a more pronounced and consistent self-awareness than I have witnessed in my nearly 30 years experimenting with this project. The pressures of the pandemic, combined with the nature of the Zoom platform, appear to have brought game-changing enhancements to a learning experience already known to be profound.

For one thing, in a presentation meant to be a revelation of self-understanding, Zoom offers a presenter surprising advantages. We all missed the physical classroom we had left behind, full of people to actually be and interact with. But in reality those people would have

been teenagers, self-conscious, sleep-deprived, distractible teenagers. In spite of all my coaching, slouching presenters would still have slid clammy hands into pockets as audience members surreptitiously threw things and shuffled feet. While often entertaining and endearing, all this is usually more distracting than meaningful.

A Zoom presenter in a time of social distancing is likewise presenting to a class of teenagers. But members of this presenter's audience are not encouraging one another's goofiness. In my students' suburban middle-class community at least, each audience member is sheltering in their own home environment. A Zoom presenter virtually enters the home of each audience member. On Zoom, a presenter still presents for the rest of the class. But during the presentation, those classmates exist to the presenter only as underlying tiles—a quiet, invisible layer of faces or nameplates tucked behind the presenter's screen. As a Zoom presenter, I can rest assured that audience members have a chance to focus on my presentation.

What does this mean for a Zoom audience? Viewing the presentation on their own screen with no flesh-and-blood classmates in their immediate environment, a Zoom audience member is likely to be less self-conscious, more attentive than in the actual classroom, especially given the personal nature of these presentations. Indeed, audience members can be significantly more engaged than they would be in a physical classroom. Alison describes her own reactions:

In this rather harsh time ... being home more than anyone would like, for days turned to weeks turned to months has allowed for a lot of self-reflection for myself, and I assume most others. So to be able to take these thoughts and put them into words ... was a very fascinating thing to do. Through the presentations of all of my friends and classmates, I

felt more connected to each of them, as watching someone essentially present their entire life story in a presentation [in] their own words is powerful.

The presentations Alison is describing are considerably more intimate than classroom presentations. Every presentation is a one-on-one connection between the presenter and each individual audience member.

The realization that some online learning environments can truly be more intimate and personal than a physical classroom environment, though new to me, is not new to students and younger teachers. These personal advantages of technology may figure prominently in what's to come—maybe sooner than later. Just as technology enables us to more effectively counter the isolation created by the pandemic with a new focus on helping students find themselves, the global imperative to establish racial justice makes such a deepening of self-knowledge essential.

#### Our Students Need Us to Innovate

A quarter century of testing has turned classmates into competitors, isolating young people from peers with whom they most need to share their developmental journeys. Our Gen Z students—members of a generation with exquisite, hard-won (and often carefully concealed) self-awareness—are harmed mentally and emotionally by this separation. Sheltering has intensified the separation, creating a heightened need for meaningful connections, and for learning that deepens our knowledge of ourselves and others.

One of the quietest students in her class, Allison (with two “l”s) was moved to write about sharing her self-discovery in the online Creed presentations:

Sharing with others was quite nerve wracking at first but I think being able to share over the zoom platform really allowed me to be comfortable in the environment and open up

to my classmates with a full heart. Overall, the creed reflections ... really allowed me to understand myself in a new light.

Allison goes on to describe the common experience of these presentations among her classmates:

Listening to our classmates' creeds was also an extremely valuable experience. Although it was definitely different from how it would feel being presented live in person, it was a new type of comfortable and I feel like it really allowed each individual to express themselves in a realistic and true manner.

I suggested earlier that sophomores have taught me about a new kind of learning our students need if they are to come to terms with the crises of our times. What have they taught me? I've learned that my students need me to embed their learning with experiences that help them understand themselves in what Allison called "a realistic and true manner." The Personal Creed Project is one example of such an experience, guiding them to contemplate the influences that have shaped them, identify the values they choose to stand for, and begin considering the roles they will therefore play in the world. Sophomores have shown me that this kind of learning guides young people to develop healthy senses of identity, and thereby establish meaningful relationships with others and their communities. The new kind of learning they need will guide them to graduate from high school as conscious individuals becoming citizens who make contributing to their communities a priority. The crusade for racial justice provides young people an opportunity to develop their hearts and minds as they contribute here and now. But before they can learn to more deeply understand the lives and needs of others different from

themselves, they need to understand themselves in a “realistic and true manner.” How can teachers promote this new kind of learning?

We need to change how we think about curriculum. How should we renovate our current test-focused approach to more fully serve our students’ needs to understand who they are and how they fit and cope in a world that will ask them to play more decisive roles as adults than any recent generation has been asked to play? At the moment, most schools’ educational missions do not include the serious pursuit of self-knowledge. But we know from the work of developmentalists Ba and Josette Luvmour that the essential developmental need of a teenager’s journey is to form an identity that can help them bridge successfully to their adult lives. A core part of their school learning experience should therefore be designed to support the healthy formation of their identities. Our students need adults who are aware of their specific developmental needs, and know how to nourish those needs. The Luvmours’ work with Natural Learning Relationships is an essential resource for teachers and parents. “Children’s developmental trajectory,” reports Josette Luvmour, “is strongly influenced by our nurturing” (24).

Unfortunately, curriculum today allows little room for nurturing. I have found the two-legged approach I described earlier useful for designing nurturing into my courses. Last year, Zoom helped my sophomores and me support one another in delivering and responding to Creed presentations. What new tech tools will I find this year to enhance the arc of nurturing I will offer my students? Yong Zhao, scholar and thought leader in the ongoing revolution for fuller humanity in education, puts it this way: “We need a shift, a new paradigm. We need to abandon



the horse wagon. We need to invent a new system. We need policies that stimulate local innovation, so we can all start moving toward the new paradigm.”

In the continuing reshaping of our society for racial and economic justice and environmental survival during and after the pandemic, classroom teachers should be incentivized to begin designing for self-knowledge. We should train to become experts in guiding our students to integrate self-discovery into their learning. Samika, from the class of 2021, was calling for this kind of learning when she wrote: “We have been shown many powerpoints about learning to accept others who are different from ourselves. Wouldn’t it help us to accept others if we learned something about ourselves?” Samika and her generation need teachers willing to innovate for our students’ more fully human development. In a recent video, the incomparable Yong Zhao offers a memorable closing banner for us to contemplate and wave: “We need to think differently about readiness. Stop making kids ready for school, and start making school ready for kids.”

#### Works Cited

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