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Resilient Pedagogy: A Foreword

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RESILIENT PEDAGOGY: A FOREWORD

Jesse Stommel

On July 10, 2020, I [tweeted](#):

“Words I’d prefer never to hear again after the first half of this year:

Pivot

Resilience

Unprecedented

Continuity

Silver lining

New normal

Reopening

Social-distance haircut

Liability waver

Zoom”

I’m guessing that my resistance to at least a few of these words is obvious. Zoom is, quite literally, tiresome, and there is now copious research about “Zoom fatigue.” When we’re in rooms together (or even in traditional online courses), we aren’t generally staring at close-ups of heads and torsos for hours on end. Being constantly framed by a camera (and in personal spaces) is exhausting, as is seeing ourselves in a sea of boxes arranged neatly and tidily into rows and columns. I still flinch at the word “reopening.” Just over two weeks ago (from the day I wrote this), I got my first COVID vaccination shot. I’ll get my second shot in less than a week. I’ve been “locked down,” and more strictly than many, for over a year, because my mom is immune-compromised. The idea of “reopening,” or “returning to normal,” or whatever other colloquialism is favored on the day, is bewildering. I have no idea what I can do now that I’m vaccinated. I still haven’t fully reckoned with or made sense of the last year.

My mom had a brain hemorrhage and a pulmonary embolism a few months before the pandemic. In March of last year, Hazel’s preschool “pivoted” online. I’ve been teaching (at least partly) online since 2007. I still can’t fathom the idea of online learning for a 3-year-old. My husband was laid off from his job in April. Our cat died of hypertrophic cardiomyopathy in July. That was just days before we moved cross-country, from Baltimore to Colorado, to be closer to my mom and the rest of our family. Throughout the first 9 months of the pandemic, I held open online office hours with my colleague Sean Michael Morris, where we were joined by 100s of educators from around the world. During one session, someone said, “if this is what teaching

continues to feel like, I'm not sure whether I want to be a teacher anymore." Those words continue to resonate.

My issue with the word "resilience" is that I believe the capacity for resilience is a point of privilege. This isn't to say we shouldn't encourage resilience, support students in their resilience, or design resilient pedagogies — so long as those pedagogies are flexible and can be adapted on the fly to meet the specific needs of the specific students we find ourselves working with at each of our institutions on any particular day. And we must leave space for a genuine acknowledgement and accounting for the real material circumstances and acute trauma teachers and students face. Today, this year, always, on a daily basis. Some of the students we work with are food-insecure, some are queer, some are homeless, some are being bullied by other teachers, some are Black or Indigenous, some are disabled and not receiving even close to adequate accommodations (or even compassion). So many educators are also struggling, and too often the word "resilience" can feel demoralizing for those folks barely able to get their basic needs met.

The work of resilient pedagogy, the work of Critical Pedagogy, is both utterly not practical, because it depends upon us showing up to the work of teaching with our full complicated, emotional selves, but it's also practical in the sense that there are specific things we can do tomorrow to make our institutions and the experience of learning more hospitable.

In her chapter at the start of this collection, Lindsay C. Masland writes, "I have wondered whether we need a new teaching approach called 'resilient pedagogy' at all." I would say that we don't, even as I'm honored to write a foreword for a collection with Resilient Pedagogy as its title. This approach isn't (and certainly shouldn't be) new. So many students were struggling before the pandemic, and those are the students who were most likely to have faced particular difficulties over the last year. There is nothing new, there should be nothing new, about a call for "resilient pedagogy." That this feels new is, perhaps, the greatest evidence we have for how ill-prepared teachers and educational institutions were for the pandemic. That this work feels new is the greatest evidence we have for how much harm was done to marginalized students for all the years preceding the pandemic.

What we need, and what this collection offers so vibrantly, is a thoughtful discussion of exactly these things, what students need, how students have been failed by our educational systems, and how we all need to respond in this and every other future moment of crisis. This is the note that the first chapter from Masland ends on: the task of counting the pandemic as "just one of many disruptions that have always conspired to threaten the most vulnerable of our students and to use the inevitability of these disruptions as the impetus for building an empowering and liberating learning environment for all." And this theme recurs throughout the chapters here.

In their chapter, Buyserie, Bryson, and Quistberg ask, "Can learning be more responsive to shifting material circumstances?" Colton and Phillips argue for a "proactive," not a "reactive" approach to design. Janae Cohn

writes about the importance of student development being recognized as a “process.” And Rivera-Mueller and Erickson argue that, “curriculum is not a product that teachers can make and deliver to students. Instead, curriculum is a meaning-making process that involves teachers and students.” Ultimately, this book is about “teaching the students we have, not the students we wish we had,” as I’ve written with Sara Goldrick-Rab. It’s about drawing students into the sometimes messy process of learning.

Resilient pedagogy means acknowledging that not all students will be able to meet us exactly where our institutions expect them to, and teachers won’t always be able to meet students exactly there either. When the work is honest, as so many of the teachers in this collection show, it will look slightly different from one classroom to the next, from one teacher to the next, from one student to the next, from one embodied experience of learning to the next. That’s the work of a resilient pedagogy — to look for gaps in our expectations, to wait patiently, to lecture more quietly, to listen, to anticipate rather than accommodate, to offer a flexible series of invitations.