

Transfer of Qualities After “Transfer of Qualities” by Martha Ronk



Thursday, March 12, 2020. I breathe a sigh of relief because tomorrow is the last day before our two-week spring break. While we aren't sure about what this new virus is or if it will reach the Midwest, the chance to step away from school is very much needed. One of the art teachers pops his head into my room.

“Take everything with you; they are closing school tomorrow.”

My mind rushes into high gear. What will I need? How long will we be gone? Why do I have so much paper? I grab things indiscriminately—whiteboard markers, students' graded retake quizzes, and even a basket of scratch paper—but I don't know what will be important, because I don't know what's coming.

I'll learn later that the things I'll miss most will be things that couldn't have fit in my bag. And I'll find that new items, new points of attachment, rise to relevance in unexpected ways. In the months that followed that Thursday in March, my students and I had to relearn our symbols for “classroom” and incorporate new objects and habits into our shared understanding of school. We discovered how artifacts held us all in community, appreciating their importance in hindsight, through their absence, or discovering them new, in this unknown space.

ROOM SEATING NUMBERS

What I miss most is the seating chart. Each Monday when students walked in the door they were handed a number. Over time, each number has been carefully decorated by the bored hands of ninth graders, but none were ever lost. Students never got tired of making fun of my odd-looking bubble fives.

What I miss most is the mingling. Even though the table numbers never changed, students still needed help finding their seats. It took one student a whole semester to realize the tables were in numerical order. My small room forced them to scoot by each other as they started class.

These numbers started off as an impersonal way of getting kids to connect, but they transformed into representing us.

What I miss most are the introductions. In the beginning, they dreaded getting the number, anxiously looking at me when they were the only boy at the table, or screaming with delight when they ended up with their friends. Each week they had to introduce themselves to their new tablemates. Slowly, they started to meet each other.

What I miss most is the transfer of ownership. I would hand over the number saying, "Welcome, I am so excited to have us learn together. This week will be what you make it." No matter what number they got or who they sat by, they couldn't complain. It's only for a week and we are all here to learn together. Everyone has something to bring to the table.

What I miss most is this symbol of our community. These numbers started off as an impersonal way of getting kids to connect, but they transformed into representing us. As each number was passed out, it transferred the qualities of me to the student, the student to the group, the group to the class, and the class to the content. These paper numbers brought us together.

TEACHING IN MOTION

My desk at home is not a proper height. Or maybe I'm just at my desk for too long. The mental load I carry has manifested itself in my shoulders and neck.

My desk at school was rarely used. I was standing while teaching, kneeling while

explaining, pacing while planning a lesson, or maybe sitting in the communal Math Center with students. While I never had a pedometer, I am confident I met the 10,000 step requirement each day. While teaching I would leap into the air to convey my love of exponent rules, crouch over a student's work to help them find where they wrote $2 + 3 = 6$, and speed walk across the building to use the restroom. If someone asked I would say that I don't use my hands to talk, but that's because I use my whole body. I am known for standing on desks, dropping to the floor, and the famed "High School Musical" jump. You know you're doing something right when a child asks, "How can you be so awake all the time?" Now I teach while sitting, hunched over my computer grading online assignments, collapsing my shoulders in frustration when I can't teach something effectively, and stare at my screen while I try to figure out a way to contact a student in need. The small airspace visible in a Zoom call does not do me justice. The invisible box presses in on me. I can feel the pressure building inside my muscles, truly grasping the ideal gas laws. There is not room here for my joy.

A NEW ATTENTION TO PUNCTUATION

I once wrote an email with a period and was declared "angry" by a parent, so now I end most of my sentences with an exclamation point. It's all about finding the right balance. If I use it in every single sentence I come across as young and therefore not smart enough to be a math teacher, but if I don't use it enough I sound mean and accusatory. This wasn't really a problem before except for the occasional parent email, but now I email and leave online comments for my students several times a day.

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These written communications are the only ones we have now. What am I conveying? Can they tell what my tone is? Am I too focused on the right answer rather than the process? What is my personality in this sterile environment? Does the little bubble with my face on it remind them that I am a person whom they

know? A person they were frustrated with, laughed with, learned with? Can the correct number of “!” convey how I miss them and hope to see them again? I will myself through the keyboard and the screens, hoping the human connection isn’t lost.

CREATURE COMFORTS

It’s not all bad. Here at home I can control my physical environment a bit more. Take a bathroom break when I need it. It’s cold in Minnesota, and my hands are freezing, but rather than turn the heat up I find a sweater and brew a cup of tea. Any kind will do. Jasmine for when I am feeling reflective. I think about how my dad loves this tea and taught me not to steep it too long so it doesn’t get bitter. Chai with sugar and milk when I want a bit of sweetness. (Before lockdown, chai occasionally made it to the school building, when my husband would deliver a cup on random afternoons.) Sometimes a long-steeped earl grey, the kind my brother-in-law said tasted like dirt. Perfect for a mood where I am inclined to cut the crap. And the mugs! At school, I normally had one math-themed mug, but at home, I can use them all! Buffalo china from my mom for when I want to harken back to olden times and feel the calm that comes with wisdom. My “anxie-tea” mug for when I need a laugh, remembering how my roommate gave it to me after I was panicking. The oversized one I found at a thrift store to contain the copious amount of whipped cream I put on hot chocolate and imagine the people who owned it before me. Sometimes I even come back to my trusty math mug, the one my best friend got me for the Christmas when I got her the same one! Great minds do think alike! As I drink, I imagine the warmth filling my body and radiating outward. I’m grateful. This moment that would never have been afforded me at school is now my solace, my grounding, and my hand warmer.

NOTES

My dog is barking wildly in the background of my meeting. I turn off my mic and yell at him. Only then do I realize I forgot to turn off my camera too, and my students are giggling at my frustration. I am filled with annoyance, embarrassment, but also hope. The mail has come. And while it could be junk mail, or a catalog (seriously, who signed me up for these catalogs?), it could also be a letter.

Despite being a millennial I have always loved to write letters. My now-husband and I wrote weekly letters to each other throughout college, I always write a thank you note in response to cards I get, and I maintain several other correspondences with family and friends. With the pandemic, it seems that people are starting to rediscover the gratification of letter writing.

Children seem to understand this joy inherently. They pass notes to each other, they doodle in their agendas, and they are much more likely to write a note to me rather than tell me something. On our last day of school before closing, one of my students wrote me a note. I keep it on my desk at home as a way to remember that we make a difference.

Ms. Oakley, thank you for being a great teacher. You always make funny jokes and you are also willing to help me. Thanks for making me like math!

"Thanks for making me like math." I'm reminded of our impact on one another. Isolated as we are now, in teaching and learning, this connection is less obvious but it is still there. Students laughed at my "If only there was a mute button in class!" jokes. We organized birthday drive-bys and even tried to make group pictures using our backgrounds. It's not much, but it's something. I'm proud of the connections we found a way to make during a difficult time, when we felt so far from one another. And I know my new appreciation for the mundane, ordinary objects of a classroom is a part of a deeper understanding I've gained about what school is, and how we make it.



Now it is May. I have made it to the end of the year teaching online, and it turns out that I didn't need any of the items I frantically threw into my car. Other objects, while not needed, were sorely missed. New objects started to define my work space. My students felt it too. These objects have power, and I hope to remind my students with each interaction that even apart we remain connected.

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