

THE HUMANITY OF THE HUMANITIES

MB Speaks

TEACHERS' STORIES OF STRUGGLE AND SUCCESS
THROUGH THE PANDEMIC



FALL 2022 SPECIAL ISSUE

THE HUMANITY OF THE HUMANITIES:

TEACHERS' STORIES OF STRUGGLE AND SUCCESS
THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

Authors: Marc Kuly, Lloyd Kornelsen, Sarah Reilly, Meghan Rauch, Bailey Gillies, Chantal Desmarais

MB Speaks

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STRUGGLE AND SUCCESS THROUGH THE PANDEMIC



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Teachers as Researchers

Educators truly know and understand the art and science of teaching. To that end, we are grateful to the educators who shared their “narrative inquiry” in this special edition of the MSSTA journal.

Each article is evidence of the following:

- the valued expertise and insight of educators
- how the teacher-research approach serves as a model for the benefits of supporting a collaborative, inquiry, action-oriented approach to professional development
- new ways of knowing, doing, being and becoming

Teaching during the pandemic has not been easy. Despite endless forced changes and ‘pivots’ we have not been provided the time and space to reflect on the impact of these changes. In particular, how they have affected our thinking about teaching and learning. By sharing this special issue with the MSSTA community, we hope that we are recognizing the importance of creating that time and space. The educators who have shared their narratives in this issue are part of the social sciences and humanities community in this province, and we recognize the value of hearing their stories. Our hope is that this special issue and the stories it contains will inspire and incite discussions about the impacts of the pandemic on our pedagogy--How has it changed us? What will we take with us and what are we willing to leave behind? With the shadow of Covid still hovering over us, where do we stand now? What matters now? Let’s take the time to reflect and let’s make room for dialogue.

-LINDA CONNOR

-MSSTA EXECUTIVE MEMBER, MSSTA JOURNAL MANAGING EDITOR

-KEVIN LOPUCK

-MSSTA, PAST PRESIDENT

Introduction

-LLOYD KORNELSEN

In the winter-spring of 2021, seven teachers met on five occasions, after school, to tell stories of their experiences teaching in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Five of the teachers were social studies/humanities teachers from the Seven Oaks School Division; two of the teachers were professors from the Faculty of Education at the University of Winnipeg. The professors organized and facilitated the conversations; both had been social studies teachers for many years before joining the Academy.

Each of the five two-hour sessions built on the previous ones, as individuals shared their teaching experiences and responded to one another's writings (the writings were done between bi-monthly sessions). As the storytelling sessions unfolded, two things became clear. First, the stories contained insights and learnings from which other teachers might find ingredients for their own growth and might offer inspiration, affirmation, and hope. Second, as common themes began to emerge, and as diverse experiences began to interweave, the

meanings and purposes of teaching were enlightened and informed (see Kuly in the Afterword). For these reasons, we made the decision to share the writings. Also, because as Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg (2011) claim, teachers have access to understandings that can go beyond what outside researchers have produced: understandings that come from a place only teachers have traversed. In other words, teacher knowledge is critical to expanding knowledge in education. The claim that teacher experience constitutes and counts for unique and indispensable knowledge in education has been noted in academic literature since at least the 1980s. Teachers' professional knowledge and rhetoric, it is argued, are derived from decisions made and actions taken in the "heat and thick of teaching" (Bullough & Gitlin, 2001, p. 9).

Since the authors share much of their teaching experience through stories, a few words on narrative inquiry: Narrative inquiry is widely documented as uniquely suited for accessing teacher professional knowledge and for the

production of teaching knowledge (Bullough & Gitlin, 2001; Carter, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, 1990; Huber, Caine, Huber & Steeves, 2013; Schnee, 2009). Oftentimes, stories can serve as a primary portal between experiencing and understanding phenomena. Beginning as lived experiences, these encounters can develop depth and nuance when recounted as told stories. Yet, being rooted in experience lends authenticity to narrative, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) remind:

As we tell our stories as inquirers, it is experience, not narrative, that is the driving impulse. We came to narrative inquiry as a way to study experience. For us, narrative is the closest we can come to experience. Our guiding principle in an inquiry is to focus on experience and to follow where it leads. (p. 188)

Also, it should be noted that all teachers that participated in this experience were social studies/humanities teachers and that this invariably informed their pedagogical practice and educative stance. Peter Jarvis (critical theorist) and Max Van Manen (hermeneutical phenomenologist) write about how teaching requires an ongoing openness to the call and vulnerability of the other (Van Manen, 2015) and a continual accessibility to, and care for, the student or student group (Jarvis, 1995). Andres Vercoe (1999), constructivist learning theorist, described it as teaching dialogically.

To do so, he said, teachers need to approach re-occurring topics afresh, allowing for the potential to constantly relearn and recreate the subject anew with students. To teach this way, dialogically, can be exhausting, but it is often seen as critical and necessary by those who teach for democratic ends and for ends of human-becoming (Freire, 2007).

What follows are four accounts of teaching during the pandemic and of responding to the challenges inherent therein. Each account is unique and derives from experiences in the “heat and thick” of teaching and from an unwavering commitment to teaching well. But first, a brief synopsis of each:

Sarah has taught Grade 11 history for the past six years. At the beginning of the 2020/21 school year, Sarah explained that she did not want to return to work. With the COVID-19 pandemic raging, she did not feel safe. Sarah lacked her usual buoyancy and motivation and was overwhelmed by her own, and others', expectations of her and other teachers. This had been the only time in her teaching career that she had felt this way and she was concerned about her mental health. Although Sarah was committed to student-centred learning for emerging democratic citizens, she feared not being able to engage her students and accomplish these goals. To overcome these challenges, Sarah returned to a strategy that she had used in other situations where

teaching had proven challenging—that of project-based learning. In assigning students their projects, she asked them to engage with those historical and social issues most relevant to their lived experiences. In Sarah’s piece, she describes her students’ accomplishments and says that, by year’s end, she felt “truly inspired” and transformed as a teacher, as she witnessed students find their agency and apprehend their passion for social justice.

Meghan also teaches Grade 11 history. Like Sarah, she realized early on in the pandemic that she would need to change the focus of her teaching. Entitling her piece, “*How Essentialism Grounded My Practice and Reframed My Teaching During the Pandemic*,” she found inspiration from writers like Greg McKeown (2014), who advocate for concentrating on the essentials of life. Meghan decided to apply McKeown’s ideas to her teaching practice by focusing on the essentials of her teaching. For her, this meant focusing on: 1) Critical historic thinking concepts, 2) Meaningful student engagement, 3) Student literacy, and 4) Current events. Through this approach to teaching, Meghan says that, by year’s end, her teaching and student engagement were improved and permanently transformed.

Bailey is a beginning teacher, teaching high school English. She started teaching a year before the pandemic hit and was in the midst of seeking to “discover Ms. Bailey, the

teacher.” When the pandemic first struck, she says, it was difficult not to be consumed by the fear and anxiety of friends and teaching colleagues. However, Bailey quickly realized that responding to crisis was something she knew well, having been a social services worker for many years. And so, she did what she had learned to do: she “dialed things way back” and simplified her teaching. Bailey describes in detail how that manifested in her classroom. In the end, she says, meaningful conversations and connections with students happened that otherwise would not have. She concludes that, as difficult, unpredictable, and chaotic as the circumstances were, the pandemic offered a learning experience that was necessarily unique and indispensable to “discovering Ms. Bailey, the teacher.”

Chantal is a humanities support teacher, which afforded her a unique view of teachers and students as they struggled to teach and learn. Chantal says that, despite not having a “how-to guide” for teaching in pandemics, teachers continued to teach through the “heaviness.” How teachers and students responded to these unprecedented circumstances, she says, enlightened of the basic human needs of safety, belonging, purpose, and connection. These circumstances also generated growth, awareness, and shifts in teaching perspectives (e.g., on assessing students and focusing on essentials). In the end, Chantal reflects, the pandemic emphasized the importance of centring our practices around students’ sense

of belonging and purpose, to ensure authentic and meaningful learning experiences in and out of our classrooms.

About the Author

Lloyd Kornelsen was a high social studies teacher for twenty-five years. Currently he serves as an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Winnipeg (UW). In 2020, he was awarded UW's Clifford J. Robson Memorial Award for Teaching Excellence. Lloyd authored the book *Stories of transformation: Memories of a global citizenship practicum* and co-edited the book *Teaching global citizenship: A Canadian perspective*.

Pandemic Teaching:

Finding Inspiration Through Project-Based Learning

-SARAH REILLY

“To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.”

—bell hooks, 1994 (Author, professor, social activist, and feminist)

I fell in love with teaching before ever entering a classroom as an adult: it was the experience of working with secondary-school-aged children through coaching that drew me to teaching. Although I enjoyed my own high school experience, becoming a secondary school teacher was never my plan. Upon entering my Master of Arts program in Canadian and Oral History, however, I found myself sitting alone in the cold, quiet Manitoba Archives building, looking forward to completing my research and escaping to the gym to coach. Working with inner-city youth through basketball programs at the University of Winnipeg, I came to realize that what I truly wanted to do in the future was to combine my

interest in working with young adults with my love of history and a growing passion for social justice. In turn, my final year of my M.A. focused on creating and facilitating a local activism oral history project for the Active Citizens cohort at Nelson McIntyre Collegiate.

I was once told that a teacher should be able to summarize their philosophy of education in just a few words. Following that advice, my philosophy is simple: I believe in student-centred learning for emerging democratic citizens. As an educator, I strive to create a safe classroom environment where my students know that their personal beliefs, identities, and interests are valued and respected. As stated by educator Glenn E. Singleton (2021) in *Courageous Conversations About Race*, in order for difficult topics to be broached in a meaningful and educational manner, educators must facilitate an environment within which students feel comfortable participating in conversations that may, at times, feel uncomfortable. As I developed and refined my philosophy and

practice throughout my first six years of teaching, I learned from experience the importance of establishing a safe classroom in order to teach from a social justice lens and encourage my students to challenge their own preconditioned ways of thinking.

Themes of systemic oppression, privilege, social justice, and activism are at the heart of all that I teach. It has become my goal as an educator to help all learners develop a fundamental understanding of our society in order to become active citizens who participate in democracy in a meaningful way. Over the years, these themes became integrated into my teaching practice through a variety of interactive activities and projects. In the fall of 2020, however, most of these strategies could no longer be implemented. The COVID-19 pandemic had been raging across the globe for nine months. Returning to the classroom that September was an overwhelming and frightening experience for students and teachers alike. I did not know how to engage my students when they could no longer sit near one another or participate in activities together. Desks were separated by six feet, masks had to be worn at all times, hand sanitizer was to be used upon entering the classroom, and social distancing had to be maintained. I could no longer teach using the interactive games, debates, and activities that had best engaged my students in the past.

Throughout the first five months, my emotions were swept up in feelings of fear of the virus, failing as a teacher, and becoming increasingly disillusioned by our provincial government's lack of support for schools.

For the first time in my six years of teaching, I did not want to go to work. I lacked motivation; I was nervous, and I did not know how to reach my students. This significantly impacted my mental health, as previously I had loved my job. I struggled to let go of past expectations—both for myself and my students—and to find new ways to make school meaningful and enjoyable again for all of us. Even though it felt impossible to plan beyond a week at a time due to the growing number of COVID-19 cases and the constant possibility of returning to remote learning, in December, I decided I had to make a change. I had begun the semester by introducing Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) TED Talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*, and used this presentation to explore questions about stereotyping, systemic oppression, immigration and migration, and agency. Throughout the term, we read personal stories from war veterans, Residential School survivors, and internment camp survivors. We understood the importance of exploring individual and collective memories of communities in order to understand a community's complete and complex experience.

With this fundamental baseline of understanding, we decided to embark upon a small-scale community oral history project to learn more about our own community. After pre-teaching the basic purpose, values, and methodologies of oral history research and the interviewing process, students conducted preliminary research and chose persons from within our school's community (family members, teachers, and friends) to interview. The project was spread out over four weeks: two weeks of remote learning followed by two weeks back in the classroom. During the first two weeks, students met with me online, conducted preliminary research, and completed and transcribed their interviews. In the final two weeks, I gave students the option of writing a feature article on their interviewee (a format we had practiced earlier in the semester) or creating a different final product that represented their own creativity and their interviewee's life story.

It is my belief that students emerge as critical and historical thinkers through project-based learning. I was nervous about how my students would respond to being given the responsibility to conduct such an independent project. I also believed, however, that the opportunity to interview someone of their own choosing would help to engage learners in a meaningful way by creating a personal connection to their interviewee—their very own primary source. As historian Pattie Dillon

(2000) argued in *Teaching the Past Through Oral History*, the process of interviewing individuals and transforming their stories into historical documents helps to create an authentic connection between learners and the history they are studying. When the time came for students to present their final projects, it was obvious that many had become invested in their interviewees' stories, and in turn, in their learning. Final projects ranged from feature articles to original pieces written for the guitar, to poetry, short stories, and multiple forms of artwork. While I did lose a few students during the remote learning period, most excelled at their chosen oral history projects. They creatively and effectively wove their interviewee's life stories into the themes we had covered during the year, focusing specifically on individual agency. It was an amazing experience for me, on a personal level, because my students' passion for their projects reignited my own spark, which burned brightly and lit a path for me as we moved into the second semester.

When we began the second semester in February 2021, COVID-19 cases were down, a number of vaccines had been approved, and fears were subsiding. I was beginning to feel like myself again. I was teaching Grade 11 Canadian history, Grade 10 English, and Grade 9 social studies. With the success of the community oral history project, I decided to create a specific focus within the broader

theme of social justice and active democratic citizenship for each course. My hope was to engage all of my students in exploring a current event that they felt passionate about. In all three courses, we began by exploring Adichie's talk and unpacking the ways in which single-story narratives develop and the multitude of ways in which they can be harmful. Due to the heightened roles of public officials and decision-making in day-to-day life during the pandemic, I found that students were more interested in learning about the role of government bodies and politics than ever before.

In social studies, we explored the theme of celebrating our individual identities. This theme led to discussions of human rights, privilege, and systemic oppression. Students became aware and were angered as they realized that, in many countries, they would not be allowed to attend school or express themselves in an honest way due to cultural



and political restrictions around sexuality, gender, or religion.

From here, we dove into how rights are protected under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and questioned the constitutional and ethical validity of Quebec's Bill 21. Students were clearly engaged in their learning because it was directly connected to their own experiences. Much of our student body comprises Indigenous youth—many of whom are from northern communities—first- and-second generation Filipino and Indian Canadians, and refugees from many countries. Since the start of the pandemic, a large number of our students had been directly impacted by the rise of anti-Asian racism. Another major portion of our learners had family members involved in the Farmers' Protest in India. Students researched social justice movements to which they felt connected—namely, Stop Asian Hate, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, Indian Farmers' Protest, #MeToo, Fridays for Future, Black Lives Matter, Dress Like a Woman, and Take a Knee. Next, to help them see the ways in which one person can make a difference, I asked students to choose a social justice advocate who inspired them. After researching their subject, they presented their chosen advocate to the class, after which we voted from among all candidates to determine our 2021 Social Studies Global Human Rights Ambassador (GHRA). Learners gained a basic understanding of intersectionality, agency, and how being

members of multiple minority groups impacts privilege and power. Individuals who were members of the groups for which they advocated and to whom the students could relate received the highest numbers of votes. Amandla Stenberg, a Black, gender non-binary actor, became our GHRA. Federal NDP leader, Jagmeet Singh, whom many students felt connected to as first or second-generation immigrants, was a close second.

Over the course of the year, learners at all levels were watching the news and following politicians on social media to assess their response to the pandemic. Some students felt angry or ignored, and all felt voiceless. Students wanted to better understand how decisions were being made, especially those about lockdowns. Many disagreed with the government's claim that there was no transmission of COVID-19 in schools. Since many of their parents were employed in high-risk occupations as essential workers, many students worried about the safety of their family members. Many others soon became concerned about the well-being of elderly relatives living in seniors' homes. This led to a discussion of the many forms of systemic oppression. Who is ignored in political decision-making and whose voices are heard? How can you actually effect meaningful change? In each class, we explored these questions as we followed the gut-wrenching trial of Minnesota police officer Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd. While our

focus in history class was directly tied to personal and collective experiences, in social studies, these themes were connected to our government and human rights studies. In our English course, we read a novel that directly addresses systemic racism and Black agency: *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely. I was impressed and inspired by the discussions and action plans the students created throughout the term. Despite the challenges of masks, social distancing, having to attend school on alternate days (and engaging online from home when they were not at school), and missing any form of normalcy, students thrived when given the opportunity to employ agency in their learning experience. Many students shared their own experiences with discrimination, and we all learned more about acting as allies and advocates.

Despite the whirlwind of challenges that the year presented, and the emotional rollercoaster students and staff rode throughout, I left this year truly inspired. The students' desire to develop their own agency during the pandemic created a unique opportunity for engagement in activism and social justice. Learners at every level left the 2020-2021 school year with a deepened understanding of what democracy means on a personal level and with a desire to participate in the process—many calling for the voting age to be lowered to sixteen. The students became increasingly aware that seemingly different social justice movements

are largely interconnected in the universal fight to end systemic oppression. For many, this grew as a direct result of their experiences during the pandemic. For me as an educator, this year was emotional, challenging, and transformative. bell hooks (1994) believed that we should engage in the practice of teaching from an understanding of “education as a practice of freedom” (23). While most teachers, myself included, were not able to complete the curricular outcomes of a regular school year, I did not leave the school year concerned about the academic ability of my students. Instead, I am hopeful. I believe that these young learners are more passionate about their role as democratic citizens than those who came before them. I believe in their desire to have a meaningful role in influencing the future as we continue to work towards a more just and equitable society for all.

About the Author

Sarah Reilly received her Master of Arts degree in Canadian and Oral History from the joint programme of University of Winnipeg and the University of Manitoba in 2013, and her Bachelor of Education degree from the University of Toronto in 2014. She has been teaching English and social sciences at Maples Collegiate since 2015. In 2016, she began teaching two first-year University of Winnipeg history courses to students in Seven Oaks School Division, through the Seven Oaks Beyond Grade 12 program.

How Essentialism Grounded My Practice and Reframed My Teaching During the Pandemic

-MEGHAN RAUCH

In 2014, Greg McKeown published a book entitled *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*. I came across this book a couple of years ago while trying to simplify my personal life. Jump to March 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic. Literally overnight, teachers were forced to transform their practice. I quickly realized that if I was to survive this shift on a personal and professional level, while also creating a space where my students could learn and be engaged in our new reality, I had to change my focus. One of my strategies was to adopt McKeown's idea of essentialism in my teaching. He states:

The Way of the Essentialist isn't about getting more done in less time. It's not about getting less done. It's about getting only the right things done. It's about challenging the core assumption of 'we can have it all' and 'I have to do everything' and replacing it with the pursuit of 'the right thing, in the right way, at the right time.' (McKeown, 2014)

At the beginning of the school year, I decided to apply this philosophy to my teaching, especially in my history course. I had to begin by asking myself these questions: What is essential that my students learn in this course? What do I want my students to leave the classroom knowing and being able to do?

The Six Historical Thinking Concepts[1]

I had recently been shifting my teaching of history from a chronological approach to a thematic one and decided that a true commitment to this way of study was a good way to chunk topics for students and help me better organize the course for partial distance learning. I also knew that I wanted to be more intentional about emphasizing the six historical thinking concepts (HTCs) that are part of the history curriculum in Manitoba. Being able to think critically about the past and present was something that I decided was essential.

[1]See Seixas, Morton, Colyer, & Fornazzari (2013) for more information.

I started the semester off with six weeks, focusing one week each on the six HTC's. I focused on giving students a solid foundation on how to think in history, focusing less on what to know about history. The critical thinking concepts became the driving force of the course rather than a chronology of events.

Engaging Students in Meaningful Discussion

With students wearing masks in class and being physically separated from each other, a culture of disengagement quickly formed that needed to be addressed. As a solution, I made discussion a focal part of the learning process in class—students needed to talk. They were clearly lacking and craving social connection with others after having spent many months in lockdown and isolation. I quickly noticed that by giving students concrete knowledge about how to think and talk about history, the way students engaged with historical content went much deeper. On their at-home learning days, students often had a text to read, and the next day in class, we began by discussing the text with partners (in a safe manner), which led to a larger group discussion. While this is not a revolutionary approach, it was an essential element of learning that had been lacking in my history course. Students began making all sorts of connections to the present and judging the actions of the past. Watching this unfold, as a teacher in the classroom during a global pandemic, was truly inspiring. In fact, this was

a great improvement from how I had seen students interact with history and each other in the past in a regular school year.

Engaging Students in Literacy

Serendipitously, I came across a book this year that justified what I was doing in the classroom. The book is entitled *These 6 Things: How to Focus Your Teaching on What Matters Most* by Dave Stuart Jr. In his book, Stuart (2018) talks about focusing, again, on what is essential in the classroom. He claims that what we need to focus on is building knowledge and literacy: reading, writing, speaking, and listening (he is intentional about not claiming to have come up with a new idea) (Stuart, 2018). Adding to what was essential content and know-how, I decided to also prioritize various literacy strategies as ways of representing information and a basis for most of our evaluations. Also, being a French Immersion classroom, language acquisition and literacy should be interwoven into all curricula. We did a lot of reading in our class. But we didn't just read: we learned how to read actively and take research notes. Students learned to curate information and produce various types of visual representations of information, such as infographics, timelines, and photo essays.

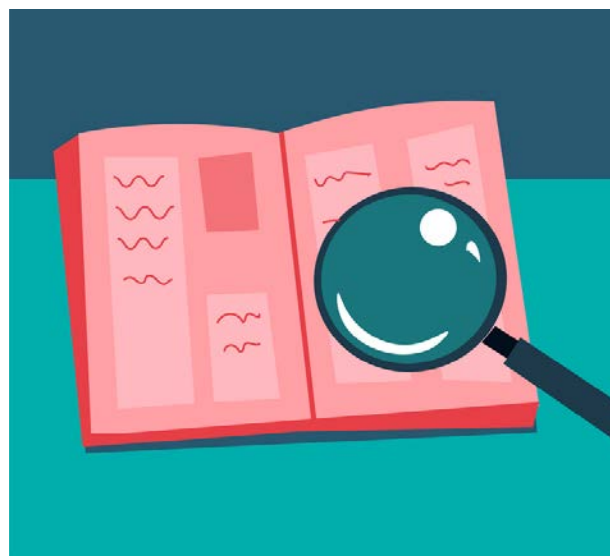
Another literacy that we focused on was how to interpret art. We learned about the rules of composition and studied how different artists have represented Indigenous Peoples from a

primarily European perspective and how this has led to ingrained social stereotypes. We then explored Kent Monkman's series, "Shame & Prejudice: A Story of Resilience," where students learned the importance of Indigenous stories being represented in art from an Indigenous perspective. This was tied to learning about how to adopt a historical perspective. Students analyzed one of Monkman's pieces, then made their own artwork that represented an Indigenous perspective of their choosing. I have noticed that in an approach where students are learning how to do real things in the real world, they find the learning more engaging (I also find it much more engaging to teach this way). Students learned new skills that can be transferred into other curricular areas and produced some highly creative final products.

Teaching the Past to Better Understand the Present

Another intentional shift I made to our history course was to focus more, even daily, on current events. While learning about how to analyze a primary source, we also learned about fake news (from the past and present) and how to identify it within media today. Students were highly interested in current events and increasingly engaged in local and world issues, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, climate change, and world politics. By learning how to interpret what was happening in current events, students saw the

value in learning about history and how it can help to understand what is happening in the present. For example, we compared the January 6th Capitol Hill riots to the Upper and Lower Canada Revolutions of 1837 and 1838. We also compared the severity of the justice system on Louis Riel and how Trump has completely (up until now) evaded any criminal responsibility for his various questionable actions. In February, we studied Black history in Canada in light of the Black Lives Matter movement. In brief, pairing current events with history, as well as applying the HTC's, has led to deep learning for students and learning that truly matters.



All in all, while teaching during a global pandemic this past school year has presented many hurdles for both students and teachers, it has given educators a unique opportunity to innovate. By focusing on essentials, I believe my teaching has improved, as well as student engagement. This year has not been about

covering more or less of the curriculum but covering the curriculum better. I believe that I have accomplished this by focusing on what is vital and most important in the history classroom. It is my hope that students are leaving my history class not just knowing about important events, dates, and people in Canadian history, but with the skills to think critically, analyze, and evaluate what they read about history and current events. With what I learned this year—the importance of keeping things simple and focusing on what is truly important—my teaching will never be the same. I will continue to teach this way once the COVID-19 restrictions are lifted, and things return to normal in the classroom.

About the Author

Meghan Rauch has been teaching high school French and social studies for ten years in the French Immersion program in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Her teaching is defined by creating authentic learning experiences for her students, using the community as a classroom, and focusing on education for sustainability. She is currently working on her Master of Education at Cape Breton University in the Master of Education in Sustainability, Creativity and Innovation program.

Teaching from the Heart:

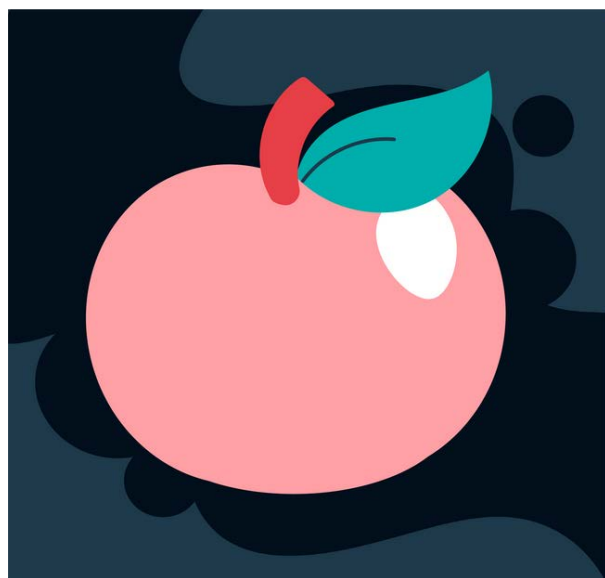
Lessons from My Pandemic Classroom

-BAILEY GILLIES

I came into my career as an educator a little later in my life, after many years of working in social services. My work experiences in the counselling field have framed my approach to teaching in a very specific way. I cannot enter a classroom without a deep curiosity for what is occurring within the minds and hearts of the people I teach.

I have always felt more comfortable as a listener than a speaker. As a helper. As a support. I am less comfortable speaking aloud for long periods. I am less drawn to academic rigour and more energized by exploring emotion, examining thoughts and the life experiences which create and frame those thoughts, and focusing on developing real-life skills that help people to flourish. I felt excited to bring this approach into my classroom when I entered my teaching career. I felt confident in my ability to connect with kids, to build confidence, to have fun, and to teach them how to know themselves.

My first semester of teaching took place in a normal world. There was an incredibly fun



balance of excitement, panic, and adventurous experimentation as I floated along each day with my classes, my first students. As an emerging teacher, the majority of my teaching experience has lived within disequilibrium. This is the life of a new teacher. One day I feel entirely successful, as if I had reached the depths of my students' hearts and minds. The next day, blank stares. My confidence in my ability to teach to the curriculum, while also engaging students and retaining their attention, fluctuates with each day. However, I know that all these feelings, this slow but steady progression towards

success, are normal and that with continued practice and engagement, I will begin to discover who Ms. Gillies is as a teacher.

In my second year of teaching, I taught Grades 9 through 11 English language arts. I had great groups of students, with many strengths and challenges. Just as we got into a flow together, with my routines and procedures beginning to fall into place and students buying into the activities and lessons I shared, March 2020 arrived, and with it, the powerful sense of chaos that we have now all become accustomed to. The world was thrown into panic mode. At the start, this feeling consumed me. How was I, a brand-new teacher, supposed to know how to teach students online when I was still learning to teach? How was I, a new staff member, going to build connections with my staff team? How would I seek feedback from my peers and administrative team? How would I know if I was doing a good job? And most importantly, how would I connect with my students? How would I know how they were doing? How in the world could we continue working collaboratively, exploring our ideas and feelings, and continue building relationships, when we were physically so far apart? I could see how easy it could be to spiral into a well of fear and worry. The contagious fear spreading among colleagues and other new teachers crept into my thoughts now and again.

But then I remembered: this is a crisis. I know crisis. I may not have perfected classroom management, I may not be that comfortable assessing student learning, but, in a strange way, “crisis” is my comfort zone. So rather than fixating on how I would assess their comprehension of a short story, or how well they organized their thoughts into paragraphs, I shifted my priorities a bit. I leaned into what I knew mattered: Are my students okay? And if they are not, what can their English teacher offer that might help them to become a little bit more okay? What knowledge and skills could I offer them to create a sense of lightness in their daily life? I decided to dial things way back. Simplify.

During our first two-week remote-learning period, my main goals were well-being, self-reflection, and engagement. For the first two weeks of remote learning, I followed the suggestion of Kelly Gallagher (author and leader in literacy education) by asking students from all of my classes to do only two things: read for enjoyment and write in a journal every day (Gallagher, n.d.). I asked my students to submit their journals weekly, along with a reading log. I did remind students that while I would not be assessing things like spelling, mechanics, or organization, I wanted them to explore connections they found between their own lives and the world around them. I wanted to leave this as open-ended as possible, with

the intention that they locate events and social issues that mattered to them. I did provide some articles, videos, and news stories as prompts. I shared a few of my own entries in the hopes that students might feel more comfortable sharing theirs with me. I was candid in my entries; I wrote about how social isolation was impacting my well-being, how I missed the noise in the hallways, and some of the fears I had about our unknown future and the safety and well-being of those I cared about. At the end of the first week, I received an entry from nearly every single student. I was shocked.



Students who had never spoken up in class wrote far beyond the requested two pages per day. They talked about their day-to-day experience of learning from home, helping their siblings, and struggling to maintain a regular daily schedule. Their writing explored the challenges of being stuck inside their homes with parents who did not understand them. Not being allowed to see their friends.

Missing their classes. Missing writing a TEST in class! Like me, they so greatly missed the noise of the hallways as they transitioned from one class to another. They wrote about what they saw in the news, on their social media feeds. They drew comparisons between the current pandemic and others throughout history. One student wrote, “this pandemic is like living in a world war.” Students reached out to connect. Video calls about literary essays turned into long conversations about life. About change. About coping. About grief. I received emails asking how I was doing: students were checking in on my well-being.

Our world was gripped by a mysterious and daunting illness that impacted our physical bodies, our social connections, and our global economy. I felt united with my students because we all had at least one thing in common now. And my role as Ms. Gillies, their English teacher, continued to become clearer to me. Connection. But then there was the arrival (or revival, reminder) of another illness, another hurt, another event that occurred which sent shivers down the spines of people across North America and beyond. A young man in Minneapolis was killed by an officer of the law, in front of his community. Many of us watched this video from inside of our homes, far away and safe. We cried, felt afraid for our world, and were reminded of the heavy hate that exists in powerful ways, in places too close to home. During the heavy days following this event, I received a few emails from students

asking to talk about what happened. Asking if I too would be attending the Justice 4 Black Lives rally at the Legislature. I said I was, and later that week, we waved to one another from afar, through the crowds of thousands of masked Winnipeggers. Connection.

By chance or coincidence, my Grade 11 English class had already been having conversations surrounding anti-Black racism and police violence. On the day of George Floyd's death, we had just finished reading and exploring a novel that mirrored this real-life story: *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017), a beautiful and powerful novel that tells a story of the impacts of police violence and anti-Black racism in America. This novel opened a window that allowed for deep conversation and built empathy within my students.

In addition to facilitating online discussions about plot, character, and theme, we also explored the connections between the significant message of this novel and what was going on within their own world and its heart-wrenching relevance. We explored the power of poetry and song, drawing comparisons between the narrative beneath the lyrics and the significant themes and ideas within the novel. Students applied their understanding of figurative language to pull meaning out from lyrics in ways that wowed me. Their assignments demonstrated interesting

connections between *The Hate U Give* and the civil rights movement; between Tupac, the Black Panthers, the magnificent force of Beyoncé, and the various social issues present within their local community.

Collectively, we questioned the relevance of this "American story" to life in Canada. What do these stories make us think about? Do we see similar stories in Canada? In Winnipeg? Does this change our idea of what it means to be Canadian? Would people have reacted with such outrage if we were not experiencing a global pandemic? How has the pandemic impacted our reactions to George Floyd's death? Our ability to protest? Our ability to create change? Our ideas about the world? Now that I have participated in these incredibly meaningful conversations with students virtually, I know that I can facilitate true discussion and deep learning in my real-life classroom. I feel most comfortable with teaching from the heart and teaching from person to person. When it comes to knowing all the content, having all the right answers, and knowing how to deliver things in a way that is engaging, I often feel as though that is what I am still learning. This is my learning curve as a new teacher.

The pandemic certainly threw my routine off-kilter; it interrupted my previously quite predictable teaching journey. It took away my reliable strategies and comfort, but then

offered incredible opportunities for real human connection. It taught me that regardless of the state of our world, and regardless of the struggles my students face, I can offer them opportunities to reflect upon those experiences and learn from them. I do not know how not to teach from the heart. This experience revealed to me the strengths of my approach, offering a learning experience that, as a new teacher in a normal world, I may not have received.

About the Author

Bailey Gillies is a heart-forward humanities educator currently teaching at the Biindigen School (TERF) within New Directions. Prior to this, she taught in the Seven Oaks School Division, and has additional experience in the non-profit sector, supporting and advocating for women and single parents.

Teaching Through a Pandemic: a Reflection on Priorities

-CHANTAL DESMARAIS



This pandemic started in March 2020. This meant remote learning, social distancing, masks, ever-changing guidelines and protocols, no physical contact, and a complete disconnection from the life we once knew. Only a few months into the pandemic, an event happened in Minneapolis that shifted the world's focus from the pandemic to a deep conversation and debate around systemic racism and social justice. When the end of June came, it left us all feeling vulnerable and lost, holding so many questions and very few answers. How do we provide an authentic and meaningful learning experience for students within this world of

disconnection? How do we navigate uncomfortable conversations when everyone is so stressed? How do we help students process these big events and strengthen their sense of self to empower them to stand up against all these injustices?

September came quickly, and before we could even ensure adequate spacing between each desk, high school students were moving through the halls, trying to understand a hybrid schedule our staff still could not wrap their heads around. Masks covered our faces and social distancing made interactions feel awkward and foreign. There was a sense of urgency to get the school year started, coupled with an immediate fatigue around how to *actually* get it started while keeping everyone safe.

Being a support teacher, I work with many students throughout my day. Supports vary from academic supports, social-emotional supports, transitional supports, and everything in between. In a normal year, I move about the school throughout my workday; in and out of classes, open spaces,

one-to-one office conversations, and meetings in students' homes when they are not attending school. Imagine being told you cannot move in and out of spaces as freely as you need to, cannot visit students at home, cannot have too many students in your office at one time, and must wear a mask during all interactions. Do you know how hard it is to smile with only your eyes? Knowing I cannot offer a hug on a hard day or sit and eat with a student to connect and check in has made my work feel meaningless and superficial.

Walking through the haze of our first few months back in the fall, everyone seemed lost and seeking something. Staff were re-inventing everything they thought they knew about teaching, from their practice to their resources; students were juggling broken routines, online assignments, and a lack of peer group interaction. When an opportunity arose to join a humanities focus group on teaching through a pandemic, I felt immediately drawn to this opportunity. History and the humanities help us to connect our past experiences, both personally and historically, to our present circumstances in order to apply our observations and lessons to improve our future. The world around us is reeling from uncertainty and discomfort around the pandemic and the systemic racism happening all around us. Many of us feel a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness. What is interesting about teaching humanities this year

is that we are living through world-changing experiences, and although we can reflect on similar experiences from the past, our experiences now are different as they are directly affecting all of us and, therefore, are emotionally loaded. We have been isolated due to COVID-19, missed milestone celebrations, fallen sick, lost loved ones, and have witnessed and experienced tragic outcomes due to systemic racism and social injustices. All of this has not been read in a history book but experienced by the staff and students around us every day. We all feel the weight of this year on our shoulders. This focus group has been a space for me to not only reflect on my practice throughout the year, but also to follow the journeys of a few classroom teachers who have dug deep to ensure continued meaningful education for each of their students.

Through this heaviness, we have continued teaching; taking things one day at a time. Constantly reflecting on our practice and adjusting to ever-changing protocols and events around us. I have come to truly understand that everyone is seeking safety, belonging, purpose, and connection. We may seek and find these in different ways, but we all need them to survive. This pandemic has tried to rob us of these human needs. It has caused gaps and struggles with learning, mental health, and physical health. Many students have lost sight of their academic and life goals and have missed crucial

developmental opportunities for high-interest extra-curricular activities and events that help them create their sense of self. We have seen an exponential increase in mental health needs within our student population, with not enough supports and services to help them through it. School staff have spent all year juggling tough daily decisions. Which parts of the curriculum to teach this year and which to leave out? Should expectations for students be the same as in previous years? Should we sit with a co-worker for lunch for much-needed professional and personal dialogue? How to discuss current world events while ensuring that everyone feels stable and safe to do so? The list goes on. School staff have become anchors for so many students and have begun to feel the pressures of this responsibility. Coupled with fewer opportunities for meaningful dialogue and collaboration with coworkers, the mental health of staff has also been compromised. At times, it has felt like we are all floating by each other, on separate islands, unable to connect with each other. These gaps and struggles will take years to heal from.

However, like all events throughout history, this pandemic has not only created struggles but has also generated growth, awareness, and a much-needed shift in perspective. As teachers, we have reflected on how we value and assess our students. We have shifted our approaches to build in more opportunities for



connection, we have reflected on what is essential and matters most for students within our curricula, and have emphasised the importance of including social-emotional check-ins and skill building with our students. We have taught and role-modelled the importance of speaking out in the face of injustices, standing by and up for each other, and ensuring our actions and choices are caring and inclusive of all those around us.

This pandemic has emphasized the importance of centring our practices around students' sense of belonging and purpose to ensure authentic and meaningful learning experiences in and out of our classrooms, even during a life-changing experience. This last year has taught us that there is no time like the present to dig into uncomfortable conversations and to always empower each other to stand up against systemic racism and social injustice. I have been reminded that education is at the

heart of our community and helps strengthen and build that community. Even a pandemic cannot change that.

About the Author

Chantal Desmarais is currently a Vice-Principal at Collège Garden City Collegiate. During the peak years of the pandemic, she was a Grade 11/12 support teacher at Maples Collegiate. She started her career teaching incarcerated youth at the Manitoba Youth Centre and has also worked as a support teacher in an early years dual-track school. Her teaching practice has always been centered around relationships and continues to be as we head out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Afterward: The Humanity of the Humanities

-MARC KULY

Perhaps because schools are so commonplace, much of the work that goes on within them is taken for granted. The last two years of life in Manitoba have put an end to that. The COVID-19 crisis pushed schooling into public discourse. The shutdown of schools and eventual shift to online instruction brought the complexities of teaching and learning to families' living rooms. The discourse around schooling was also heavily influenced by a once-in-a-generation review of the public school system and the introduction of a reform bill predicated on the assumption that schools in the province were failing. Teachers' work became the focus of attention and debate in ways I have not seen over the twenty-five years I have been involved in education in this province.

Within school communities, the disruption has been immense. Fears about the physical safety of teachers and students introduced a persistent sense of anxiety to the already challenging work of teaching. The shift to online and hybrid models of instruction eradicated the stability of the school day and

the rhythm and tone of school culture, while also creating significant new technological skills for teachers and students to acquire. The provincial government's insufficient and confusing response to protecting against school outbreaks, coupled with the hostile tone struck by their legislative agenda, added to the emotional labour involved in going to work every day. The shocking effect on teacher mental health created by this crisis has already begun to be quantified (Sokal et al., 2020) and the aftershocks of all of this will no doubt be felt for years to come. Given this context, I offer this Afterword as an expression of gratitude for the teachers who participated in this project. I hope my part does some justice to the restorative effect their stories had on me.

Over the course of three online sharing sessions, the teachers involved in this project discussed the experiences they were having while teaching a variety of humanities courses through the pandemic. The transcripts of those sharing sessions record the ruminations of teachers trying to make sense of what

being a teacher means when all the written and unwritten rules about schooling have been thrown out the window, leaving only the two most basic components of school life—teachers and students—to figure things out.

The undeniable psychological effects of the pandemic crisis were omnipresent throughout the sharing sessions. As one teacher shared:

first semester was awful. It was just awful. I was really unhappy, I was really scared, I didn't feel like me. I love teaching, and I did not ... I just remember one day walking through the doors and thinking, man, I don't like walking in to school anymore. And it was fully because of COVID and the fears around that. Then I felt like a terrible teacher. Yet the sessions were full of heart. We gathered at 4:00 p.m. each time, after a day of teaching both online and in person, and still our conversations were characterized by laughter, curiosity, and remarkable hopefulness.

In one session, we looked directly at the seeming disconnection between the energy of the sessions and the weight of the stress the pandemic had created. One teacher shared, "The best P.D. you'll ever have in your career are the times admin gives you time to chat with other teachers." Later in the discussion, another teacher concluded:

I appreciate what you have shared about

the value of meetings like this. Cause [sic] I'm listening to the two of you speak and I'm looking forward to hearing everyone speak. And it's nice to hear people excited about what they're doing.

The storied nature of the story sessions was a key factor in the energy we experienced. The "chat" referred to in the preceding quote was actually more than idle chatter. In each session, participants shared stories they had prepared in advance and the conversation that followed was connected to those stories.

Jo-Ann Archibald's (2008) text, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit*, offers perspective on why the storied nature of the sessions contributed to the energizing effect they had: The strength of stories challenges me to think, to examine my emotional reactions ... to question and reflect on my behaviours and future actions, and to appreciate a story's connection to my spiritual nature. (p. 85)

It may seem out of place to discuss matters of spirituality in the context of teaching; however, in the sharing of stories, we were doing more than talking about what had happened at school that semester.

We are all teachers, and we were all facing our own doubts and questions about our own efficacy and what it means to teach in the

context of the pandemic. In one teacher's comments, you can see that the doubts and questions extended into far more profound terrain than practical questions of how to teach. She shared that she was having:

moments of self-doubt when you're like, "What do I have to offer when my threshold is so..." I don't know if I'm saying it right. If it's so low this year for stress and for anything added extra, it just feels like, I don't know, there's just no threshold this year. It feels like there's no buffer ... I was sitting in my bedroom thinking about things all the time. And I was like, "This is not healthy."

Other teachers echoed similar sentiments, sharing that their levels of self-critique were heightened, as were their feelings of isolation. As Archibald (2008) points out, storytelling pulls us into a space where the actions of others can speak to our own interior condition. This can have a restorative effect, as was clear in the words of one participant who shared that she valued the "interchange" within the sessions that reduced her "echo chamber of anxiety" by helping her realize that "this year has been messy for everyone." In the recognition of each other's own struggles, we were also able to discover a shared desire to work through them into a space of renewed pedagogical possibility.

One space of possibility came from

reconnecting our personal and professional identities. Each in their own way, every teacher looked at the things that brought them to teaching to discover how to keep teaching with a sense of purpose intact. Whether it was a personal passion for the pursuit of social justice or a commitment to educating for mental health, each teacher dug into their own source of strength. Interestingly, in addition to our individual sources of strength, we all found common purpose in two things. One was an attention to students' lives and the other was in what one teacher called "the humanity of the humanities."

One teacher spoke at length about noticing signs of stress in students. She referred to seeing students on-screen rocking back and forth in their chairs and others self-stimulating with various fidgets and gadgets, while others became completely withdrawn. Struck by the sadness and stress in students, this teacher reformed her approach to focus on the basic needs of students and restarted her approach to instruction from that foundation.

Another teacher shared that the disruption in normal school life helped create a space where students' perspectives became more apparent:

I think of one student ... She's a student from [a northern First Nation] who is new to the city and new to a large school, an Indigenous woman, a young woman who was really struggling around learning about

history in Canada and Indigenous Peoples' experiences, and feeling like in the class, people were talking about her, but her in a past tense and that felt weird for her ... And so, feeling like her identity that's being talked about in class is a past thing, versus her being able to see it also as present, and just being able to really know who she is, what she's experienced and what that brings to her own journey in school.

For this teacher, a sense of purpose was found in seeing through the eyes of a student whom she may not have recognized before the dislocation perpetrated by the pandemic's disruption of the normal order of things brought them together in a new way. By no means am I suggesting that the disruption brought on by the pandemic was positive. What I am pointing out is that, in the stories told by the teachers, a common response to watching everything dissolve around them was to see things differently and grab onto the things that mattered most. Or, as one participant said, "I feel like everybody's stories are tying in how we have used change to transform and become better teachers."

Ayers (2004) proposes a model of teaching based in adopting the belief that every life is of equal value to every other life, recognizing that social and historical reality dictates that lives are not treated as if they were of equal value, and then taking the side of students to teach

towards a freer future where equality is more possible. A similar teaching philosophy was common across the stories shared by teachers. For some, like those previously cited, the possibility of persisting despite the challenges came from taking the side of individual students. For others, it came from understanding their discipline, the humanities, as a path towards a more just and humane world. One teacher expressed the goal of humanities teaching as follows:

I mean, I think at the bottom level, it's a desire for our students to understand and engage within the society within which you live and to care about it ... I think caring about society, understanding how we got here and how it impacts us, and then getting excited about participating in it, I think for me, those are the goals.



The general idea advanced here, that the humanities are about increasing a sense of curiosity about, engagement with, and agency to act within society, was added to by another teacher, who shared, “I think a common theme in what we’re doing is just that importance of authenticity.” The process of achieving the kind of authenticity required by humanities teaching was explained as, “you need to bring in that human element ... who you are and how you personally connect to the curriculum and how your students connect to it.” Many of the stories shared by the teachers revolve around making the decision to connect the lives of students to the events going on around them and the benefits that came from making it. For many, this action became the bedrock upon which they would build their pandemic practice.

As I stated at the outset, this project has been characterized by contrast. One on hand, the practical and personal challenges of the pandemic context weighed heavily in the lives of the professionals who shared their stories. On the other, the passionate professional commitment within their stories and conversations was inspirational, reassuring, and energizing. One moment when I felt the thrill

of connection came when one of the teachers shared this observation about what kept everyone going:

I guess it’s the humanity of the humanities or the humanity of teaching ... really, how to be a human, you’re teaching humans, but often, we de-humanize teaching. I think the mark of a good teacher knows that, that teaching is a human activity.

The humanity of teaching is clear in the stories shared here and I take heart from learning that a search for and an attempt to protect the human element of teaching turned out to be the thing that made it possible to persist over the past two years.

About the Author

Marc Kuly taught in Winnipeg schools for fifteen years. He currently serves as an Associate Professor and the Co-ordinator of Service Learning for the Faculty of Education at the University of Winnipeg. Marc's research interests focus on storytelling, Indigenous experiences in schools, and the potential for public education to become a site of conflict transformation.

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Call for Submissions *SPRING 2023 ISSUE*

MB Speaks

Greetings!

You are invited to submit to the Spring 2023 Issue of the Manitoba Social Science Teachers' Association (MSSTA) Journal.

The race to win turns us all into losers

--Alfie Kohn

In 2006, Manitoba Education released, *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind*. This document flipped the traditional assessment pyramid to reflect the assessment literature. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that assessment for learning (AfL) is a powerful practice to promote learning. The primacy of AfL is evident in the policy directives, resources and professional development of nearly every Canadian province and territory. For these reasons, the document reduced the focus on assessment of learning and granted more space to assessment as/for learning.

Assessment as/for learning decenters grades, and invites students into the assessment process. In this way, assessment is no longer something that is done to students, but is done with, by and for students (Manitoba Education, 2006). Since the release of this document, social studies educators have engaged in rich conversations about the purpose of assessment, and about how they could alter their assessment practices to centre learning rather than grading. Many more questions have emerged from these conversations: In a social studies environment, how does grading normalize individualism and competition and become a barrier to cooperative learning spaces? How do our assessment practices interfere with our pedagogical practices? Do my assessment practices invite varied literacies and modes of expression? How/do we assess discussion and deliberation? Are current assessment and grading practices irreconcilable with decolonizing practices? What are the philosophical and practical implications of ungrading? There is no doubt that assessment practices continue to invoke questions of ethics, fairness and validity. We would like this issue to be an exploration of these questions.

Call for Submissions *SPRING 2023 ISSUE*

MB Speaks

Through this issue, we hope to explore the ways in which social studies educators in Manitoba are rethinking their assessment practices.

Educators can submit to any section of the journal:

1. Pedagogy: scholarly writing connected to the issue theme. Writers should aim for 5-7 double-spaced pages. Submissions accepted in this section will serve as the anchor essay for the entire issue.
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3. Professional Development: events, learning resources, books, podcasts, organizations including student groups
4. Photos: If you have any photographs of Manitoba that you would like featured in the issue, we would love to include them.

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