The Rock Is Still Rolling

One night in 2008 during the last semester of my undergraduate studies, I was talking with a friend in a coffee shop about a piece of literature I was reading for class, animatedly conveying my fascination with critical lenses. At some point I paused to take a breath and he asked, “Have you ever thought about becoming a teacher?” Apparently, my passionate discussion of literary theory translated to teacher material in his mind. Honestly, I hadn’t thought about it, which was interesting because I had watched my dad teach music theory, guitar, piano, and voice for years. I cataloged my qualifications: I was a good reader and writer and relished both; I admired my dad’s ability to inspire his students; I enjoyed helping classmates understand concepts; and as the oldest of five siblings, I had plenty of experience as a leader and mentor. After thinking and processing a bit, choosing teaching as a career made sense, so I decided to extend my education at Purdue by enrolling in a postbaccalaureate licensure program.

The Meteor Teacher

Throughout my coursework, practicums, and student teaching experience, my desire and passion to inspire students was fed by classic teacher films such as Dead Poets Society (Haft, Henderson, Witt, & Weir, 1989) and Freedom Writers (DeVito et al., 2007). My focus was largely myopic, and I never thought to (and don’t remember being asked to) question my assumption that they were great teachers. I wanted to be like them. I wanted to be the meteor teacher who burned so bright that students had no choice but to light up, gaining new knowledge of literature and using its themes to become better people. I had high hopes for my career and my future students. Though I
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was a trained reader with a critical eye, I never gave a single thought to the reality that meteors burn up in the atmosphere—that John Keating played an essential role in Neil’s death, and that Erin Gruwell sacrificed her marriage on the altar of her students and still left the classroom after a brief four years. Even now, I struggle with why I couldn’t see the problems present in these texts. Was it because the stories were presented in a different mode and outside of the classroom? Was it because my own ego craved the kind of attention and adoration they received? Was it that I needed to believe that I could be that important, be that kind of force in students’ lives? It was likely a combination of them all that kept me from seeing the problematic nature of these teaching stories and left me holding on to the irrational aspirations of the kind of success they depict.

In 2010, shortly after finishing student teaching, I got a job teaching AP Literature, sophomore English, senior English, and Advanced Composition at a rural school in a conservative community in east central Indiana. I was so excited. I threw myself full-force into planning my courses and constructing my curriculum. I taught, I coached, and I (for the most part) enjoyed working with my students. Standardized test scores went up, which was good news for me because I had every sophomore (the year Indiana students take their graduation exam) in the building. Everything seemed to be going fairly well except for frequent visits to the principal’s office to hear parent complaints about the social justice curriculum I employed. This censure coupled with the stress, time, and effort it took to create my curriculum made it difficult to sleep more than four hours every night. My entire existence felt as though it was filtered through my battles with parents, and my physical and mental exhaustion led me to question whether what I was doing was worth it. Despite the good evaluations from the principal who so often took me to task for taking on controversial topics and the positive and encouraging letters I occasionally received from students, the negative things seemed so much easier to focus on. I agonized over the fact that some students didn’t understand or agree with the progressive and socially just ideas we discussed. I worried about the kind of people they would be. I was (and still am) haunted by the students I didn’t reach—the lives I didn’t/couldn’t change.

On a macro level, the atmosphere surrounding education grew increasingly bleak, and morale was low across the country. The push for a corporate model of education, the focus on standardized test scores, and the realization that President Obama wasn’t going to “save” us served to fuel my growing frustrations. In 2013, as my third year of teaching drew to a close, I knew that I just didn’t have it in me to do another year. My relationship with my partner was suffering (much like Gruwell’s), as was my health, similar
to meteor teacher Jaime Escalante’s in *Stand and Deliver* (Labunka, Law, Musca, & Menéndez, 1988). I couldn’t keep going, and I felt an immense shame in that. Like Gruwell and Keating, my time in the classroom was short-lived, and I had trouble reconciling the reality that I would not be a 50-year career teacher.

Burnt up (or out), I crash-landed back at Purdue in a graduate program because I didn’t want to abandon the field of education entirely. One of the first classes I took was Melanie Shoffner’s course on teachers in fiction and film.1 The work we did in that course helped me to challenge the noble depictions of meteoric teachers such as Keating and Gruwell and to confront their unsustainable and problem-riddled nature. Though it is less sexy in the popular imagination, I might have been better served as a teacher to aspire to survival. Since that course, I’ve been thinking about what survivalist teachers might be like: They would recognize the absurdity of teaching and understand that what teachers must do in the classroom doesn’t always match what they want to (or believe they should) do. Survivalist teachers would be adept at navigating, if not reconciling, these differences, allowing them to sustain a lifelong career in the classroom.

In light of my failure to survive in the classroom, I wonder how to impart the concept of survivalist teaching to the preservice teachers with whom I work when I have no firsthand experience with it myself. I’m conflicted about how to respond when they say things like, “If I can change one life, then it’s all worth it” or “I just love working with kids,” because changing one life never seemed enough for me, and being in the classroom was never as simple as just working with kids. When Tara approached me about writing the editorial for this issue, I knew I wanted to explore the notion of survivalist teaching as a more realistic alternative to the meteoric models to which I had been subjected as an aspiring teacher. A challenge I foresee in offering this revised model to new teachers is just how much of a downer reality I can promote without simultaneously squelching their passion.

I have talked recently and often about survival in the classroom with Jeff Spanke, one of my former fellow dissidents at Purdue, whose poem “To the Loud Mouth in Room 114: An Elegy” in the April 2016 issue of *English Education* is illustrative of his own meteor-survival contradiction. While Jeff and I were designing a literacy course for content area teachers together, we often expressed concern about how the student teachers we supervise contextualize why they want to be teachers. Many of them point to teacher films or inspirational teachers they’ve had as the source of their love of learning and desire to teach. While these influences aren’t altogether bad, the distance that exists between what students see and remember and the realities that exist
in the classrooms that await them could be jarring. We wanted to trouble the metaphors of teaching that predominate the silver screen to help students understand the difficulty of existing in the liminal space between what they think is best for their students and what policymakers demand of students via standardized tests. Jeff suggested reading Camus’s (1991) *The Myth of Sisyphus* as a way to introduce students to the idea of the absurd and how it can function as a metaphor for survivalist teaching. By including it in the course curriculum, we hoped that our preservice teachers would discuss and interrogate their expectations of the classroom in a way that would foster a survivalist mentality rather than reinforce the meteoric teacher stories they referenced as their inspiration to become teachers.

**Sisyphus and the Absurd**

Albert Camus was born to working-class parents in Mondovi, Algiers. After his father died in World War I, his mother, a maid, did her best to support the two of them. He attended the University of Algiers, studying part-time and working odd jobs to make ends meet. After graduating, he became heavily involved in politics. During World War II, he was active in the French Resistance and strongly opposed totalitarianism as well as the stifling atmosphere of bourgeois morality. His first significant contribution to the field of philosophy was his idea of the absurd—the search for clarity and meaning within a world that offers neither—which he outlines in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Using the absurdity of Sisyphus’s labor as a metaphor for teaching, I ask: How do we teach preservice teachers to survive in the classroom in a time when past/current/future policy makes the whole endeavor seem absurd? How do we prepare them to press onward when external forces require them to teach in a way that may seem pointless?

I think that what ultimately sealed my fate as a classroom teacher is that I had hope. I hoped that things would get better. That I wouldn’t consistently be fighting (what seemed to me) ridiculous policy changes and absurd complaints from parents (such as “your Holocaust unit disturbed my child”). I hoped that the occasional affirmations I received would be enough, but they weren’t. I ignored the fact that not all students stood on their desks for Keating and that Gruwell faced administrative push-back concerning her curriculum. Irrational as it was, I believed that unless I reached every student, I was a failure. Camus (1991) would argue that my hope was merely a device by which to elude the inevitable realization of the absurd, thus ultimately rendering a prolonged presence in the classroom impossible. Each time my irrational hopes went unrealized, they became more difficult to hold on to.
Without hope or the understanding of the absurd, my time in the classroom inevitably came to an end.

For Camus (1991), the absurd is mildly comical and measures the distance between the perceived and actual consequences of an action. To illustrate this point, he describes the absurd as a man armed with only a sword attacking a group armed with machine guns, hoping that he just might be fast enough and/or skilled enough to survive the encounter. This is how I envision teachers and teacher educators in the field. “On the front lines” or “in the trenches,” as I’ve often heard said, standing with a measly sword, poised for battle in front of the corporate-bought machine guns held at the ready by policymakers whose indiscriminate bullets pepper and destroy.

Camus (1991) maintains that there will always be those who defend the irrational. In this case, both the swordsman and those with machine guns participate in the irrational: The swordsman may think he has a chance of winning, and those with machine guns believe their bullets make a positive difference. Believing we can reach every student is as irrational as the belief that every student will succeed because no child can be left behind. To prepare for the struggle within and against an irrational system, Camus asserts that we must acknowledge that life “has no other aspect than that
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of the absurd” and that “equilibrium depends on that perpetual opposition between [our] conscious revolt and the darkness in which it struggles” (p. 21). Though he would encourage us to have no hope, he would maintain that accepting or reconciling ourselves to the fact that we should have no hope doesn’t mean we have to be hopeless. In fact, having no hope for something better and reconciling ourselves to the darkness, as it is, helps to fuel our perpetual struggle. Having our hopes dashed ends the revolt, but having no hopes to be crushed allows us to continue the fight. Thus, I think he would encourage us to teach our preservice teachers to use their swords, meager as they be, without hope of something better to survive the machine guns of the moment. Rather than aspire to be meteors like Keating and Gruwell, he would have them endeavor to be like Sisyphus, who—despite being sentenced to what the gods hoped would be a soul-crushing punishment—is “the master of his days” (p. 24).

The reason for Sisyphus’s punishment varies depending on the version of the story, but in all of them, he acknowledges and accepts the role his own agency played in making the choices that led to his eternal toil. Pushing the rock is not easy work:

One sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it, and push it up a slope a hundred times over; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands. (p. 23)

Camus asks, “Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him?” If Sisyphus has hope that there will be a time when he reaches the mountain’s summit and the rock will not roll down, his hopes will continuously be dashed. He will be relegated to an eternity of despair and disappointment. However, if Sisyphus possesses no hope for success and accepts his work as it is, the punishment ceases to be struggle and instead turns into rebellion. Refusing to be crushed by the boulder, the monotony, and the futility of the punishment, Sisyphus completely undermines the torture the gods intended, and pushing the rock becomes an act of insurrection. It is in this revolt that Camus imagines Sisyphus happy because “he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling” (p. 24).

Meteors, Sisyphus, and Survival

The 140+ manuscripts I’ve read since becoming Tara’s editorial assistant for this journal typically focus on teacher preparation for readiness—for their arrival, rather than their survival, in the classroom. The metaphors
for teaching—meteoric, Sisyphean, and survivalist—I’ve introduced here are an attempt at a way to consider how we might prepare preservice teachers to survive in the field.

The meteor teacher and Sisyphean teacher sit diametrically opposed. Meteor teachers hope or irrationally believe they can exist outside the system. That hope is sustainable for a while, but inevitably they burn up (or out) in education’s inhospitable atmosphere. They give off a brief and lovely light before they’re completely consumed by the atmosphere or what’s left of them crashes. Sisyphean teachers, on the other hand, have no hope that things will ever get better. They toil to continue teaching, pushing the boulder up the mountain every day, recognizing the absurdity and futility of their actions, content enough to stay. Camus (1991) imagines them happy, but part of me wonders if they could ever truly be, or if they become the stereotypically jaded and bitter teacher, cranky and clinging to thoughts of retirement. Perhaps survivalist teaching lies somewhere in between.

I imagine this third metaphor in terms of survivalists or doomsday preppers. These teachers recognize that the system is likely to fail them, but they can’t exist outside of it. In this realization, they have no hope or faith in the system and work together to gather materials and build shelters that would mitigate and allow them to survive that failure. They understand that their existence in a failed system will likely be less than ideal but are motivated and satisfied by their drive to survive. Rather than irrational hope or bitter resolve, these teachers acknowledge the limitations of the system and work within it to prepare for its failures. Though it may seem like they accept the inevitability and inadequacy of socially unfair and unjust policies, survivalist teachers seek to help students build skills and coping mechanisms that will allow them to sustain themselves within that system. In this way, survivalist teachers and their students aren’t crushed by a world that will always be irrational but are able to maintain passion and spirit. As teacher educators, we can prepare preservice teachers to survive by asking them to confront the present and potential future failures of the system. We can ask them to interrogate the myths and metaphors surrounding what it means to be a (good) teacher. We can help and encourage them to create strong support systems with each other now and in future schools. We can create ways for them to have more opportunities to address and experience the distance that exists between why they want to be teachers and how they will continue to be teachers. And we can work to weather systemic absurdities together. Exploring these metaphors has helped me come to a better understanding of my own failure to survive and consider how I might encourage others to avoid that failure, so they won’t be crushed by the rock just because it’s still rolling.
In This Issue

While the articles in this issue don’t tackle survival explicitly, by using the survivalist metaphor as a lens, the implicit connections become visible. Through its historical perspective, Don Zancanella, Judith Fraznak, and Annmarie Sheahan’s “Dartmouth Revisited: Three English Educators from Different Generations Reflect on the Dartmouth Conference” illustrates that the rock is indeed still rolling. Many of the questions contemplated and addressed 50 years ago, they maintain, are still being asked today. Teresa Mae LeSage’s “Teaching Story” made me wonder if, like me, she is haunted by her seemingly unsuccessful interactions with Charlie and whether or not she will survive in the classroom despite the systemic failures illustrated in her piece. In “Writing 2.0: How English Teachers Conceptualize Writing with Digital Technologies,” Lindy L. Johnson’s participants use R.E.M.’s (Berry, Buck, Mills, & Stipe, 1987) “It’s the End of the World as We Know It” as a doomsday metaphor to demonstrate their learning about writing pedagogies. Though one might read such a metaphor as negative, I’m mindful of the final line of the chorus: “It’s the end of the world as we know it/And I feel fine,” suggestive of a survivalist mentality. In “Honoring All Learners: Embedded Honors in Heterogeneous English Language Arts Classrooms,” David Nurenberg contemplates a particular systemic failure: the tracking system. Advocating for embedded honors, he identifies issues with the current system, proposes an alternative way to approach it, and provides examples of how that alternative is currently being employed at a few schools around the United States. Though it seems like a no-brainer that all schools should adopt such a model, the reality is that the status quo of dividing students according to “ability” (a term David critiques) is deeply entrenched, so I imagine it’ll take a concerted effort to move that rock. Like Sisyphus, we’re still on the go, and perhaps a concern for teacher survival in the classroom always connects in some way to discussions of teacher arrival. Given that some of the problems of 50 years ago are still problems today, perhaps teaching preservice teachers how to survive those (and other) problems in the field should become a greater focus, so if it is the end of the world as we know it, we can still feel fine.

Note

1. This course resulted in Dr. Shoffner’s (2016) edited book Exploring Teachers in Fiction and Film: Saviors, Scapegoats and Schoolmarms. It’s a good example of the mentoring I received in my graduate studies—several of her students (including me!) were contributors.
References


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