
Reflections on Lasallian Education during Pandemic

Kerri Mulqueen, DA¹

The mission of Lasallian education has long been: Teaching Minds, Touching Hearts, and Transforming Lives. In the Education Department at Manhattan College, we even have this motto printed on the tee shirts that our majors wear at Open House. To trace the origin of this ideal, I found myself reading the 1996 translation of John Baptist de La Salle's primer entitled *The Conduct of Christian Schools* where Brother Edward Everett writes in the Introduction that

teachers are invited to see themselves as called by God to touch and win the hearts of students, to be as an older brother who guides them, and to act as a guardian angel entrusted with protecting the physical and moral welfare of these young people.¹

In summarizing De La Salle's description of those called to teach, Everett draws from both the practical framework of *The Conduct* as well as from De La Salle's theories laid out in his Gospel-inspired meditations² when he says that teachers should strive to "put themselves within reach of their students."

Beginning in March 2020, when Manhattan College closed its physical campus to classes as COVID-19 began its relentless march across the United States, faculty and staff found themselves uniquely far from the physical reach of the students whose education had been entrusted to us. In those early days, I found myself struggling with an evergreen problem I recognized from conversations with student teachers semester after semester where they get out into actual K-12 classrooms and try *in vivo* to put the theories they have been taught into practice. Like my advisees, I found myself struggling with how to turn the principles of Lasallian education into reality when a laptop screen played middleman to all my interactions with my students. Without the concrete reality of our brick and mortar campus and without an ability to rely on classroom rapport and shared communal experiences, how could we bring to life something approximating Lasallian education?

In describing the ways in which I stumbled across my answer to that question, I am going to start from the teachings of John Dewey, an educational philosopher and social reform advocate from an earlier age. In his hundreds of published essays, a recurrent theme for Dewey was one of innovation. He argued that we never truly think until we are confronted with a problem. Many of us in this profession who consider ourselves to be avid thinkers, thinkers of big thoughts – or maybe just overthinkers, at times – were faced with the pandemic landscape on our campus, in our city, and in our country over the last eighteen months. There were suddenly new and very real problems toward which to direct our attention. In our work, we all have bags of tricks that we go to because they have served us well; but a lot of those well worn teaching behaviors were poor fits for the moment at hand. The disruption of our routines meant that we had to find new ways to meet those course objectives listed on syllabi and also to deliver the kind of education that Manhattan

College prides itself on; the kind that focuses on human dignity, the kind that advocates for social justice, the kind that expects excellence from its practitioners.

I got an early lesson in how this disruption could sweep away formalities and patterns that no longer served the present conditions from my son's first grade teacher, who a few weeks into remote schooling, responded to a concerned email I had sent by calling me from her cell phone while she was out for a walk with her own daughter, bridging what to that point had felt like layers of distance with the simple directness of her human voice. She had let go of protocols around parent contact in order to meet the needs of a student and affirm her commitment as an educator. In the space of that phone call, she created community where there had been only distance; and she showed me what a gift can be waiting when we sweep aside patterns that no longer fit.

In my own classes, the feeling of shock and emergency that characterized the spring 2020 pivot gave way to that dreaded phrase "the new normal"; and working alongside my students, I found ways to create communion. We did this by allowing humanity to be at the center of our virtual class meetings.

I spent the 2020-2021 school year teaching from a home office jerry rigged from half a bedroom in my Bronx Riverdale neighborhood apartment, using room dividers and a ring light and the same desk on which I wrote undergraduate papers more years ago than I care to admit. Technology is part of the story of how a year of classes came together under those conditions; and yes, Google jamboards and Flipgrid and breakout rooms and screen sharing were key components in how course content was delivered and processed. But it was the front loading of our shared humanity that made the experience into something transformational. Because I teach evening classes and have very small children who can't go to bed without letting mama know – even when there is another caretaker on duty – my students saw me kiss my kids goodnight many times; and the student teachers whom I worked with in afternoon seminars heard from a parent's perspective the frustrations that cropped up and the successes that flourished with online learning in the K-12 set even as they themselves were navigating the ups and downs of remotely delivered lessons.

From my seat behind a twenty year old desk in the Bronx, I got to see the posters and photographs on the walls of my students' bedrooms from Queens (New York) to California. I met their pets. I heard their mothers call them for dinner in English and Spanish and Albanian. There was an intimacy to our shared online space that allowed us to see one another clearly and to exist in community, as De La Salle instructed, "within reach" of one another. We weathered a generational upheaval together, processing questions as large as the lasting impact of school closures on student learning and sharing experiences as personal and destabilizing as the COVID-19 infection that sent one student's wife to the hospital while another student quarantined alone, signing into class from an unfamiliar dorm room.

I found a new, impossible level of the game Work Life Balance as I spent afternoons managing my two kids, seemingly constantly in need of meals, as well as seeing to the needs of a cohort of student teachers even more anxious than usual as they squirmed to try and shift three years of in-person pedagogy training to fit an entirely new paradigm. To serve both constituencies, I started hosting advisement sessions over Google Meet from my kitchen table in the evenings so that my students could talk to me about their concerns while simultaneously watching my two year old

slowly turn orange from eating spaghetti and meatballs with her hands. What started out feeling like a loss of control as two separate parts of my life collided turned into a gift when I realized I could see the students' shoulders relax in those moments, almost as if we were truly breaking bread together around a common table; and when I told them "we are all figuring this out together," there was palpable proof all around us that they weren't just empty words.

Across the physical distance imposed by circumstance, we became more attuned to our roles as community members: holding space, affirming, and returning again and again each week to one another and to the task of learning. I noticed that our shared window of classtime was a respite from my own worrying over the news briefs of the day and an opportunity to immerse in discussions that complicated thinking, expanded perspective, and generated application of new knowledge. Some of the best work I have done as a teacher and some of the best work that I have seen from students was produced under conditions that engendered intense stress but that concurrently produced tangible connection.

Community took on new meaning nationally and globally as well over the course of our eighteen month disruption as we and our students wrestled with not just the COVID-19 pandemic but also with a reckoning for the chronic pandemic of racism that still today demands our critical attention. Our old friend John Dewey once told us that, "Democracy has to be born anew every generation and education is its midwife."³ In this historic time of pandemic, of social unrest and calls for meaningful change, and of bitter political conflict on the national and the local stages, we can consider Dewey's edict about the intertwining nature of democracy and education to be a rallying cry for all of us who have made learning the center of our life's work.

What we do with our students is important. When we ground our lessons across all disciplines in the principles of ethical conduct, when we use our voices and our platforms to advocate for meaningful social justice, we are building up the next generation of citizens. Our choices in our classrooms will have ripple effects. By filling up our students' cups with challenging work, with affirmations and affection, with high expectations and with clearly communicated and historically accurate understandings of the world they live in and their potential to impact it, we are each day helping to develop a better future, not just for those students in our classes, but for all of us. As the great American thinker W.E.B. DuBois told us, "It is today that our best work can be done and not some future day or future year. It is today that we fit ourselves for the greater usefulness of tomorrow."⁴

And in the process of doing this work of education, we have a better chance of seeing what our students need most, and of being transformed ourselves, if the lessons we learned best during this time were to sweep away what doesn't work, to listen well, to embrace our inescapable vulnerability, to center humanity, empathy and equity, and to put ourselves within reach of one another.

Endnotes

1. Kerri Mulqueen, who serves as Assistant Professor of Education at Manhattan College in Bronx, NY, earned her doctorate in English language and literature at Saint John's University in New York City.

2. Cf. Edward Everett, FSC, “Introduction” in *The Conduct of the Christian Schools by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by F. de la Fontanerie and Richard Arnandez FSC, and edited by William Mann FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1996), pages 20-33.

3. Cf. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Richard Arnandez FSC and edited by Augustine Loes FSC and Francis Huether FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1996).

4. Cf. John Dewey, “The Need of an Industrial Education in an Industrial Democracy” in *Manual Training* 17 (2016), pages 409-414.

5. Cf. W.E.B. DuBois, *Three African American Classics: Up from Slavery, The Souls of Black Folk, and Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.