

## What was it like to be an ESL teacher in 2020? Reflections from the prek-12 community

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For teachers who work with multilingual students, looking past first impressions is a daily task. They know how to search for the complex thoughts hiding within a silent 12-year old, how to draw out the brilliant mathematician from a 7-year old who speaks just a few worlds of English, or how to help a high schooler express deeply held political beliefs in a new language. Such work asks teachers to become experts at getting to know their students, at using everything from quick chats before class to facial expressions during a group activity as windows into students' experiences.

Suddenly, with the advent of COVID-19, these tools disappeared. From one day to the next we moved from classrooms to bedrooms, from posters on the wall to online backgrounds, and from shared physical spaces to screens full of black boxes. How then, in a two-dimensional world, were teachers to connect with students? This is a question we have all been asking ourselves since last Spring — and when we began to discuss this forum, it was the question we asked our community. We asked student teachers, cooperating teachers, and student-teacher supervisors to reflect on a single moment from this past year. We hoped to document — and to share — a few moments from the actual experience being an ESL teacher during the 2020 school year.

We start with Esther Chung's description of "virtual travel," as her students use google images to share pictures from their lives before they arrived in the United States. Esther learns not just about friendship in a refugee camp in Tanzania, but about her own assumptions, and about the importance of giving students "space" to bring their stories into their academic work. Similarly, Katherine Morgenegg Gorbenko uses her computer as a window into a student's room, a window that allows her to see new ways of explaining a math problem — and, eventually, of helping her student teacher understand lesson planning.

On the other hand, Lynn Chawengwongsa writes of the damage caused when teachers aren't able to create the "intangible yet crucial space" of belonging for their students. Holly Jones echoes Lynn's understanding "every child has a story that we can't fully know," as she writes about what happens when she compliments a student on her writing.

The question of space is also central to Amy Proulx, as she vividly describes the homes she witnesses in her work as a supervisor for student teachers, both those of her supervisees and those of their students. Amy also asks two questions that are echoed in our final essay, by Kate Sanford: "Are the students even there? ... Are they learning?" For Kate, this has been a year of wondering "Are you even there?" as she attempts to simultaneously teach her students *and* connect with them. Her question is answered, by one student at least, via a writing assignment.

Even though Kate can't see this student, or even hear her physical voice, she finds a way to “feel what (the student is) feeling.”

In each of these stories, the blue light of a computer screen illuminates the ways that teaching and learning are essentially the same. In order to teach, we need to learn, not just about our subjects, but also about ourselves, and, most of all, about — and from—our students.