
Book Reviews

Teaching in the Post Covid Classroom: Mindsets and Strategies to Cultivate Connection, Manage Behavior and Reduce Overwhelm in Classroom, Distance and Blended Learning

Grace Stevens. (2020). Red Lotus Books. (157 pp.). ISBN: 978-0-9987019-6-7. (\$14.87 or ¥1,869)

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After over 20 years of teaching in a wide variety of settings, I found myself (along with a few other teachers around the globe) looking for direction, guidance and an appropriate approach to grasp onto in March 2020. As I thought about how to create a safe and effective classroom for my learners, I wondered if it was possible. Of course, as we know from experience now, there was little direction or guidance and certainly no theory or approach ready for us to grasp and apply to the situation. No amount of academic papers, degrees, or titles could have effectively prepared us or administrators for what we lived through with our students. That said, as things seemed to calm down and we found ways of somehow teaching within whatever situation we found ourselves in, I continued to try to understand what my approach should be and found *Teaching in the Post Covid Classroom* by Grace Stevens. I discovered some new information as well as ideas that reaffirmed

some behaviors and mindsets that I had sort of figured out on my own. Despite the book including some parts that address non-post-secondary classrooms, there are some general principles and concrete applications that I believe teachers of any area can take away and use in their own context.

The book has three sections with Part I (Chapter 1 and 2) focusing on teacher mindsets and establishing effective patterns in the classroom. Part II (Chapter 3 and 4) focuses on reestablishing effective communication and classroom management. Part III (Chapter 5 and 6) focuses on teacher self-care and managing teacher *overwhelm*. In short, the book covers teacher attitudes and mindsets, practical ideas for classroom management and material development as well as teacher self-care. There is also a free online workbook available to pair with each chapter.

Part I (Chapters 1 and 2). This book starts with a complete focus on teacher mindsets, how they can be altered and why it is so important to be in a good mindset. On reflection, I think that this chapter sets the tone for how teachers can successfully apply the ideas introduced in Part II and III (Chapters 3-6). In short, if we are not in the right mindset, any idea no matter how good is not likely to help us approach the many challenges we have and will face in the future.

We start Chapter 1 by reading an anecdote of a plane bound for Italy and mistakenly landing in Holland. The initial shock of the arrival gives way, potentially to realizing that Holland is not an unpleasant place to go, even though it is not what was expected. The idea of allowing ourselves and students to recognize dashed expectations of yet again returning to non-normal classrooms time and again and allowing ourselves to grieve the lost life events, and the energy of fresh starts is made. The author makes a quick shift after this introduction to focus on how intentional practice will play a key role in changing our mindset and, hence, our rate of success for the times to come. The last half of Chapter 1 focuses on concrete ways to engage in this intentional practice. There are many times over the past year that I have felt things were slightly out of control and found myself feeling somewhat rattled by a situation. We will recall the moment we realize that a document was incorrectly shared on the LMS, or that the Zoom breakout room is not functioning correctly and we have lost five

minutes trying to reset things. The list could go on and on! Stevens suggests the first step towards success is to make peace with our lack of control. We most certainly cannot control the students' internet speed, their device capabilities, their workspace, family support or attitudes. Literally everything.

Chapter 1 introduces a few more mindset-related issues to help teachers focus on what is really important and what is not essential to surviving. Two points that struck me as particularly important were as follows. First, everything is going to keep changing. In essence, as the COVID-19 and successive variant situations evolve, ebbing and flowing here and there, we must embrace the idea that changes will keep on coming while administration's attempt to work within the situation effectively. This does not mean you must embrace the changes themselves as you may not. That is okay. However, embracing and accepting the fact that things will be changing for a while is a key mindset. The second point that struck me takes an opportunistic view of the COVID-19 situation. Namely, within all these changes (like it or not), we have a chance to take the opportunity to rethink and reinvent some wheels that were maybe not even working before the pandemic. The author advises us that now may be a chance to make changes for the better while administration may be happy to engage with new ideas if it makes things easier for everyone. It is a chance to close the digital gap, reduce commute time, prepare students technically for their futures, focus on stimulating students' executive functional skills (self-regulation and organization), etc. For those teachers who have been itching to make some changes, this may be the time.

Chapter 2 introduces some back-to-school steps towards normalcy that are less focused on the post-secondary education setting, so this review will not touch on this.

Part II (Chapters 3 and 4). The second section of this book focuses on the basics of establishing effective communication and routines for the classroom (online or face-to-face) as well as some effective class management tips. First, Stevens describes creative ways to reintroduce normalcy for students and parents within whatever type of classroom you are currently in. Since this section focuses mostly on issues related to non-post-secondary educational institutions, I will

only touch on a few of the more relevant issues for CUE readership.

The author talks about ensuring that students know how to use technology. The author also talks about how important it is to teach students to conduct research autonomously to reduce dependency on teachers. In my experience, some of the first few months are spent asking students to find their own answers with our friend Google rather than asking the teacher how to solve some technological problem they are experiencing.

Chapter 4 covers the seven C's of effective classroom management: Calm, Consistent, Consequences, Connection, Collaboration, Communication, Cheerfulness. This section veers more obviously towards a non-post-secondary environment, but again, there are still principles that can be applied to the university setting.

Two points, in particular, struck me as especially relevant for post-secondary students. The first is the advice to teach students appropriate research skills once they've attained the aforementioned skill of autonomously Googling and researching on their own without prompting from the teacher. This involves several things, starting with learning why it is important to use the internet correctly and also showing them the need to judge the credibility of digital information. Even among university students (especially EFL ones), one will still run into some surprising sources in the citations of essays from time to time. The second is talking about both the responsibilities and best practices of digital citizenship. Understanding that things written by oneself are something we own, and information used by us in citations is also something owned by someone else. From my perspective, understanding ownership and the responsibility on the internet will surely have significant implications both on their personal, academic, and professional journeys. As teachers, we can use this as an opportunity to start them on a steady and knowledgeable digital foot.

Part III (Chapters 5 and 6). The last section of the book is called "Surviving Teacher Overwhelm" and discusses various practical self-care methods for teachers to apply. This part of the book covers a wide range of techniques for managing workload, setting routines, boundaries, productivity, and mental awareness.

As a former teacher and also author of other positive mindset types of books, Stevens highlights some habits and behaviors that we can implement to avoid overwhelm and burnout. More specifically, she understands the teacher's constant battles with thoughts such as, "I'm not doing enough", or "I should be doing that as well and encourages the reader to rather consider becoming more comfortable with doing less", basically. What is absolutely essential and what is just a neat trick that simply looks cool and shiny? Am I just spinning my wheels instead of working smarter? Are you setting boundaries on your time, energy, and number of apps you are willing to try? Are you aware that you may be comparing yourself with someone else who may have years of experience with blended learning while you are just trying to learn how to log into Google Classroom? More importantly, are you aware that you do not need to chase down every new shiny app in order to get your students to where they need to be and feel self-value as a competent teacher?

This last question rang clearly for me when I recall one teacher in an online Community of Practice group that was formed in March 2020. This particular teacher described the rather personal and thoughtful interactions of students while using a single shared Google document with his entire class. He did not seem shy or embarrassed about it, especially considering that many in his audience talked about a mix and match setup of various apps for students to share their ideas. He did, however, clearly realize (and value) that his students were sharing their personal and emotional reflections about music that was important to them as human beings while getting to know each other. They were maybe even making friends, which most college students were not able to do in 2020. The teacher was not comparing his ability to use all the bells and whistles, but rather using what he was comfortable with to bring some level of human interactions and a space for students to make friends or at least get to know each other within a less than favorable situation. Less was more, and this teacher knew it for himself.

Stevens brings us down to four basic questions we should be concerned with: "Are the students engaged? Are they persevering and problem-solving? Are they able to demonstrate mastery of a skill? Are they collaborating and having

fun?” (p. 123). Having read the whole book, I found that these four questions are meant as a basic guideline and must be taken within the context of Steven’s approach to accept non-perfection from yourself or anyone else. It is within this mindset that she encourages the teacher to scrape away all the frills, busy-work, and non-essentials. It is time to get down to the very basics and let ourselves breathe and relax even when things are not going well.

Some Reflections. Throughout this book, I was repeatedly reminded to lower expectations, not in a lazy way, but to a realistic and doable manner considering one’s given situation and resources. Second, we are reminded that every situation and child are different. This is something we probably learned during teacher training but needed to be reminded of, so that our responses would be appropriate, rather than out of context and irrelevant to the current and rather unpredictable situation. Moreover, the call to be vigilant, as ever, in continuing to be as professional as usual serves to establish goodwill and minimize the damage when things go wrong (Stevens, 2020). We should be able to establish some deposits of kindness in our student/parents’ bank accounts early in the year to carry us through any bumps that may/will occur throughout the year.

I think a few main points can be best summed up by one small example from my current teaching year. Recently, I saw a mid-semester email from the administrative office addressing a few problems reported during the first term of the 2021 school year. One problem was students contacting the office about being overloaded with assignments that they were barely able or unable to complete. I decided to send out a small one-question survey to my students immediately and ask how my workload was (I suspected it was a bit heavy in one particular course). A few of my more thorough students replied that they were finding the load a bit heavy, so I adjusted the course work accordingly. I cut some portions of the assignments and reduced some assignments to bi-weekly instead of weekly. I think the principles of flexibility, changing my mindset, willingness to rethink my approach, establishing comprehensive communication, accepting that less is more, and not letting perfection be my enemy are just a few concepts from within this book that were embodied in the retracing of my steps and

reconfiguring the last seven lessons of the term.

This book certainly is not an academic take on theories and approaches, but a simple tool that seeks to support teachers who need to rethink some old habits within a new context. Practical ways to establish a healthy, effective, and functioning post-COVID classroom for both teachers and students are introduced in an easy-to-read manner. I hope educators can pick it up and be refreshed with new ideas that energize and don't overwhelm them.

Author bio

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