

Interview Transcription: Andrew Kaufman

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DOROTHE BACH: The series *Community-Engaged Teaching in a Time of Trauma* is meant to offer insight and inspiration to other community-engaged faculty dealing with the challenges of the current moment and in the process uncovering hidden opportunities of transitioning online.

When the news came in mid-March that you needed to translate your course online, how did you react to the news that your course had to be put online?

ANDREW KAUFMAN: I was teaching the course *Books Behind Bars: Life, Literature, and Leadership*, which is of course where my university students go to Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center once a week and facilitate conversations about Russian literature with the Bon Air students. That was the core of the course. When I first got the news, my first reaction was how in the world am I going to make this work? Because the very core of this class, as I had always understood it, was the relationships between the Bon Air students and the UVA students. Relationships that grow week after week through live interactions, through friendship, through sharing of ideas and insights about literature, about life. Much of the power of these relationships was that face-to-face interaction and research over the years has shown that that aspect of the course is one of the most powerful and contributing to student learning, relationships in the classroom.

So, my first thought is what in the world am I going to do if we can't have those face-to-face relationships? Then I started thinking very pragmatically, well, but you can still have relationships virtually and we could potentially set up some Zoom sessions and sort of the groups of students could still meet. Then I learned very quickly that they have a policy of no technology allowed in the correctional center, but they overruled that policy to allow our course to continue. Then just when we thought we were about ready to set up telephone calls, not Zoom calls, but telephone calls, COVID-19 struck and infected an eighth of the youth population in the correctional center. They went into medical lockdown and any possibility of resurrecting these relationships was dead in the water and I knew that.

All this happened literally over the course of a five-day period and so back to square one. What are we going to do now? My first reaction was one of fear, of total uncertainty, and of desperately seeking any band-aids I could find, any opportunities that I could find to try to resurrect the parts of the course that I thought were fundamental to the learning.

DOROTHE BACH: How did your students react?

ANDREW KAUFMAN: Well, they had the same question that I did: what are we going to do now? What is this course going to be? And for them, the relationships and the conversations with the Bon Air

students was so crucial to this course. They didn't know, none of us knew, for about a one week whether we would be able to resurrect these relationships virtually or not. We were all sort of hoping against hope that would happen, including the students. I think in the backs of our minds, we were still holding on to this lifeline, this hope, which eventually proved futile, but I think students were still holding on to that.

Then when that became more and more clear that that wasn't going to happen, they were in the same boat that I was in. What is this course about now if they're no longer going to be meeting with the Bon Air students and having these conversations with them? What is our purpose? They had that question about the course, on top of the other hundreds of questions they had about everything from what they are going to do about graduating and how are they going to be graded and connectivity issues. A lot of students were home. Some of them in unhealthy relationships with family members. Some students had to scramble to get a job just to stay afloat. The issue of the course, what are we going to do now, was simply added on top of a hundred other real-life stressors that they, like all of us, were undergoing.

DOROTHE BACH: And your community partner?

ANDREW KAUFMAN: They were responsive in they, too, were trying to find ways to keep this course afloat. It's important to them and it's important to the correctional center students who are also receiving academic credit from UVA this semester. On a number of levels, they had a lot of incentives to want to make this work. One of the things that they did was, they bypassed the no technology rule. They made an exception for that, but then of course when COVID struck and an eighth of their population was infected and they all went into medical lockdown, which meant that they just didn't have staff to even oversee anything.

They, too, were kind of stopped in their tracks, but for them, this course experience is very important to the Bon Air students. They were working with us and trying to help us figure out what to do, but admittedly as important as this course was, this wasn't and couldn't be their top priority, right? They're running a correctional center. They have many other significant issues that they need to deal with. Everything from, most importantly, keeping the residents healthy to safety concerns to questions about what do they do? Do we send them home? But there are issues with that about sending them back to very dangerous situations. Do we keep them here? I mean, they had a number of really consequential decisions that they needed to make and to their credit, they were making the effort to still try to keep this this course alive.

I think they were in the same boat that the students and I and all of us were. We had never been here before. This is new territory. There are no rule books anywhere to help guide us in this situation. So, all of us were thrown into a situation, like the metaphor that I use, it was like we were sailing on the Mayflower towards a fairly interesting, risky destination. We've just gotten struck by a hurricane and now at mid-trip, mid-ocean, we had to reconstruct the Mayflower. We had to reconstruct the ship on which we were sailing, not even knowing what our destination was going to be at this point.

DOROTHE BACH: In that process of rebuilding the Mayflower, what were your biggest challenges as you were trying to put pieces back together?

ANDREW KAUFMAN: There were many challenges. I think in retrospect, as I look back on it, I think being able to prioritize the challenges was very important and had we not gone about it in the right way or had we focused on the wrong things; we would not have had the result that we did.

Some of my challenges were very practical, very pragmatic. I had no experience with online teaching in any form, so that in itself was a challenge. Then thinking about, another practical question, how do we resurrect these relationships in the form that they had been taking place? There were also other practical challenges about simply communication with the correctional center. They had a whole host of other issues on their minds. Maintaining really effective and supportive communication with the students and stepping into the role not just as teacher, but as mentor, as guide, as leader in a different way.

Now we're starting to get into the deeper challenges beyond just the practical. The deeper challenges were about how I was going to relate to students now. What was my role in the classroom now that we were in the midst of a crisis, right? This was not business as usual anymore. We're sailing on a broken ship towards an unknown destination. What are the leadership skills and the teaching skills and attributes that I needed to draw on in such a moment that we've never been in before? And then very closely connected to that, what is our class about now? One of the deepest questions, which is connected to that leadership question, the question of how to teach in a time like this? One of the most important things that a teacher can do in a moment of crisis like this related to that is the question what is Books Behind Bars about now at a time when the relationships as we had known them are dead in the water?

That became the fundamental, existential challenge of this course. What does a course need to be at a time when the entire world is facing a crisis we've never seen before, when students and I and our community partners are all thrown into this the same boat with our fears and uncertainties? I had to really start to dig deep and get back to the fundamentals. Go back ten years ago when I first started Books Behind Bars and remind myself and work with students to remind ourselves what is this class really about at the deepest level? To really dig much deeper than I had ever had to in recent years. Redefine what our core values are, what our core learning objectives are, and what is the DNA of this course. If you strip away everything else, what is this course really about? My students and I talked about that in our very first meeting. We came up with a sentence that we could all get behind and it was a really powerful exercise and the sentence that we came up with was, a semi-accurate quotation, that "Books Behind Bars is about community, connection, and creativity inspired by great works of literature."

That was the first step, to get in touch with the DNA of the course, which gets lost with time as you start to do things and you start to have an accretion of historical experience. The course becomes about what history, what you've done in the past, but that was no longer possible. We had to start from the beginning again and ask ourselves, what are we really about? What is our purpose here? Related to that, how can we achieve that goal of deep connection, community, and creativity inspired by works of literature despite of everything that's been taken away from us? How can we achieve our deepest learning objectives in this new environment?

DOROTHE BACH: What would be your biggest successes in that process?

ANDREW KAUFMAN: As I look back on it now, the semester is almost officially at a close, I think our biggest success is the human dimension of how we collectively, my students and I, faced this crisis together and made meaning out of it. Rather than try to bypass the crisis or wish it away, one of the ways you bypass the crisis is by just focusing and doing, doing, doing, just focusing on the external, I think we all went very deep. There was a very powerful upsurge of human learning that took place

because now our class was no longer just about what it had been about. It was a class in resilience, in community, in compassion in a time of trauma.

If we get back to that sentence that we came up with, this class “is about connection, creativity, and community inspired by great works of literature,” the way we gave flesh to that was we started talking about what does this mean to us? What are the lessons that we can learn from this moment that connects to our DNA? These are lessons in compassion, in resilience, in creativity, and community. All the lessons that had always been there in the course, in some way, shape, or form, the lessons that are so central to Russian literature, but now we were living them in a way that we hadn't. The kinds of reflection that we engaged in, that I encouraged us to engage in rather than run away from, I think that was a success.

How I redefined my role as a teacher vis-à-vis the students was also a success in that the idea that we were, my authenticity with them. I'm not trying to pretend that I'm the expert because in this new world, none of us are experts. None of us have been here before and so being very honest and very human about that and then inviting them in the process of co-learning, of co-creating this course together, in really becoming a true co-learned alongside them, not their expert, but a true co-learner because really what we were thrust into, what all of us have been thrust into it is the most challenging experience of learning of our lives. All of us, professors, students, health care workers, businessowners, parents, and everyone is right now in the midst of what I consider one of the most profound experience education classrooms of our lives.

One of the ways that learning comes out of an experience is the meaning that you make of it. I think my students and I did a very admirable job of that and part of that for me, I think, was my willingness to change. Understand that I had a new relationship with them, right? Now we had a new task.

DOROTHE BACH: The texts that you were using in your class, and I mean both the Russian literature, but then there was the text of the context. You mentioned before the fact that the correctional facility you were working with was struck in very particular ways that are reflective of the crisis, of this country. Did you make that current text part of your journey in exploring the meaning of this event?

ANDREW KAUFMAN: When you say the current text, of what the correctional center was going through?

DOROTHE BACH: Yeah, I mean if you look at the societal issues that were highlighted in this crisis and that are part of the context in which your class was designed, how much did that text come into the conversation?

ANDREW KAUFMAN: Well, this is where the students were really wonderful and resilient and creative. This is where they taught me important lessons that I needed to learn. I had so often focused on the reflective component and the growth and the personal development and I'd always de-emphasized the social activist component of this class. There is social activism built into the very nature of the class of what we're doing, but I wanted students to be able to make their own meaning out of this experience. For some, it wasn't in social activism; it was to be found in other human lessons that they were learning that they could apply to other areas of their lives. But when the class opened up, when the possibilities opened up, I gave students a lot of opportunity to really explore how they want to make meaning of this experience and a number of them wanted to be more active, more socially active.

There was a group of students who voluntarily put together a video raising awareness about the plight of correctional center residents in the time of COVID and so this was something that they had developed on their own. They had done the research. They made connections with Russian literature and so it was a true social activism project that they were putting out there to make people aware of the unique situation of Bon Air students, and especially of Bon Air, because they had been affected by COVID. In many ways, bringing in that dimension of the course, the correctional center dimension, was something that the students really taught me was important and that it was important to them. So, that became, and that will probably become, more of a mainstay of the course in the future.

The other important lesson about this for me is, as I mentioned earlier, all the challenges that a correctional center has to deal with, from the health of the residents to keeping them safe to deciding whether to release or not to release and what are all the implications of that, it really helped me appreciate the challenges that the leadership of these institutions face. It's very easy for us to criticize the leaders for the faults in the correctional system and there are many faults. Administrators of these organizations are as aware of that, as painfully aware of that, as anybody, but I also got a glimpse of the humanity and the true well-meaning intention of the teachers who really did have the residents' interest at heart and the administrators who are working around the clock to figure out what's the right thing to do, what's the safe thing to do. I had a deeper appreciation of the complex set of challenges and pressures that they were facing.

Then the third way that that text of the correctional center of experience played into the new class was that we started to see the themes of what we were going through and the themes and the relationships and all the human learning that had been happening throughout the semester now became so fundamental. We started to see these things played out in the Russian literature in ways that we never would have seen before. Just to give one example, there's a very powerful letter written by Nadezhda Mandelstam during the Soviet period. She sent it to her husband who had been taken away to a Siberian prison camp and she never sent it for reasons we don't fully understand, but she still needed to write it. It was called the "Last Letter." That last letter, that theme of "Last Letter" became a subtext in our course when students themselves chose to write letters to the correctional center students. They were never even certain when and if they would receive them, so all of a sudden this experience of writing a letter to someone that you care about, obviously it's not the same as a husband-wife relationship or being shipped off to a certain death camp, but there are a lot of really eerily parallel issues there. This last letter became a subtext to the course, especially for those students who chose as one of their projects to write letters each week, sharing their thoughts about the reading and their questions and the concerns about how the residents are doing. Every one of those letters was like a last letter, but they never knew was going to be read. Then what is the purpose of writing, of connecting, of attempting to connect with the person that you can never be certain whether they're going to receive your connection? What is the value of that? We talked about that and the students experienced it.

DOROTHE BACH: What is it that you want community-engaged teachers to think about as they're designing and then also implementing their courses?

ANDREW KAUFMAN: I think a couple of things. I think the first thing I would emphasize is treat this as an experiment, that you are treading territory that many of us have not gone down before and I think it's important to give yourself a break and not aim for perfection. Really, I think that's important. I think we need to take the pressure off ourselves to be perfect teachers and this goes for all of us right now because this is a case where the old adage is true: the perfection can be the enemy of the good. I think

you do the best that you can, you put sincere intention and effort into it, but recognize that for those of us especially who are not experienced at online teaching that we need to give ourselves a break.

The other point that I would make specifically to community-engaged faculty is to really think hard about what their class is now in this time of trauma. What new meanings does their class take on? What new significance does their relationship with the community partners take on given the world as it is today? Also be very flexible in redefining what your course is, what it's about. Maybe it's not about the same things that it was about before, as we discovered in *Books Behind Bars*. Maybe the learning objectives shift or maybe they're the same, but maybe they get executed in very different ways and maybe there are some interesting possibilities on the positive side. Maybe there are some ways to use online volunteering, virtual volunteering to reach entirely new audiences of community partners that you never had access to. Or maybe technology itself is one of the challenges, especially if you work with at-risk populations. Maybe figuring out technology and incorporating technology into the process of living, which is what we're all dealing with is a particularly heightened challenge for certain communities and maybe that can be built in more to your class. Really being flexible and creative about thinking about what is your class about now? What are some new ways, possibly even positive ways, to use technology to achieve goals that maybe you hadn't achieved before in your course? In other words, don't be terrified, but look at this as an opportunity.

Then the last point that I would emphasize to all faculty, certainly community-engaged faculty in particular, is let's not get so wrapped up in the online aspect of all of this. Let's not get so wrapped up in perfecting our skills at online delivery that we forget the really important human dimension of this moment, that the world is in territory we've never been in before. We're in the midst of a worldwide crisis, a trauma for many, a tragedy. Let's think really deeply and really creatively and authentically about what it means to be a teacher in a time like this. What are some new ways that we can relate to our students? What are some new kinds of reflection that we can encourage our students and ourselves to go through at a time of crisis like this? I do worry that in our in our emphasis to become excellent online teachers, which is a worthy and important goal to strive towards, but I think in our focus on that we might be in sight of something else that is equally, and I would argue even more important about this moment and that is the opportunities for profound human growth and learning that can take place and that we can help facilitate in our students. Learning about things like compassion, resilience, community, authenticity, flexibility, and of course learning like the kind that was described in the quote that you read to me from the beginning that I'm going to botch. Can you read it one more time? For this is a nice conclusion.

DOROTHE BACH: The quote reads: "Life is like a wave, you can't change the way it breaks, just the way you ride it."