

AHE's Online Seminar: A Bridge Over Troubled Waters
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The Association for a Healing Education offered its first ever online seminar last fall, and I was asked to share my experience as a participant. I'm not a fan of online platforms for meaningful learning. However, I am an admirer of AHE and their work, and this was a way for me to attend while remaining close to home. It was a silver lining to the pandemic, and it impacted my school year in profound ways.

For over 15 years, I taught at a tiny, independent Waldorf K-2, which sent me to Rudolf Steiner College each summer for training. Through numerous workshops there, I was immersed in the curative power of an education that addresses the whole child. The remedial work especially interested me, as my school had no support staff beyond me for students with special needs. In applying the principles and practices that AHE incorporates, I witnessed significant developments- individual students and their families benefited from this holistic approach. I loved that work, and felt blessed to be in it.

Last fall, I began working as a special ed teacher at a public Jr/High School and with the additional layer of COVID conditions, the contrast was startling. How could I bring the warmth and depth of that remedial work to a group of teens I'd never met? Where would I find the time or energy, when it was already exhausting to prepare content delivered remotely? By the first meeting, I wondered how I'd have two hours to spare on a Sunday morning... but I left every session with much more energy than I'd had before it. The small online community was full of wisdom and inspiration. Each month we were given readings to explore and guiding questions to ponder. A meaningful verse set the tone as we shared our observations and insights from the weeks prior. We shared expertise and resources as colleagues, supporting each other as we navigated this new reality together.

The focal point of our year was the senses: in a year defined by screen-time and social isolation, what could be more appropriate? We began with the lower senses, movement, balance, and... life! My students needed this more than most: our district has a notoriously high rate of substance abuse, violence and trauma. Last fall, wildfires threatened some of our homes, and literally had us all holding our breath. Sports, the one incentive many students had for school success, was lost, along with the freedom to just be outdoors in hazardous air quality. How could I bring a healthy sense of life and movement to students in these conditions? AHE was there to help me answer that question, and to keep asking it.

Drawing from my conversations with the group, I first filled my empty classroom with plants. This helped me feel there was life in the room, and gave students a visual background on zoom that was soft, green and welcoming. Those plants became part of science experiments, which led to rooting dozens of smaller plants. These went home with students and spread to other classrooms at the school. I planned lessons that got students exploring outdoors and interviewing their families. Into their packets of inevitable paperwork, I added handwork projects, form drawings, textural, edible and scented items as writing prompts. To create a sense of warmth, I added hand-written notes in each weekly packet. To encourage more movement, balance and rhythm once students were in the classroom again, I brought a rocking chair, which soon became a favorite of other staff visiting our room.

Many of my efforts fell short, but a few seemed to have real impact. In November, a mother called me in distress that her child had not eaten or stirred from bed in three days: she was frozen in overwhelm about work, and anxious at the prospect of eventually attending as a new student. With the help of zoom, I took her on a virtual “walk” around the classroom, down the hallway and out to the school yard. She agreed to zoom again the next day on her own and began joining regularly. By June, she was attending in person, and had brought her grades up from straight zeroes to all but one “A”. That initial tour coincided with a change in her own motivation.

I was able to integrate sensory elements into a unit on the central nervous system. Students practiced and documented the results of using a slower, deeper exhale to slow their heart rates under different conditions. Half the class reported using the technique outside of school in stressful situations (my ultimate goal). Most said they’d never listened to their own heartbeat or paid attention to their breathing. One student who was largely non-verbal became so fully engaged in our scientific dialogues that he had to be reminded not to interrupt! It was for this class I ended up felting a colorful model of the human brain they could disassemble and put back together. It has a warmth that can’t compare to its plastic counterpart, and gave me a tactile project all winter, too.

Seminar presenters shared vocabulary that put Steiner’s indications into neuroscience terms, which helped me translate my insights and activities to administration. Exercises that had been strictly for my own observations became part of student assignments. For example, using the “counting star” exercise in person became a diagnostic opportunity as well as a geometry lesson. Similarly, we made fraction equivalents out of the rate of hand, eye, ear and foot dominances in our math class (providing me with individual profiles in the process). Sensory experiences blended seamlessly into work on descriptive writing. I had been looking for a “bridge” to help me transition into this new educational landscape. The gift of AHE’s online seminar was not only in the support, tools and resources it provided, but also the insights it led me to: I found that my perceived gap between Waldorf kindergarteners and public school teens was not as vast as I’d thought. Human children everywhere have similar fundamental needs to thrive, and all learning is built on that foundation, whatever the curriculum. I still love this work, and am blessed to be in it.