

Adventures in Teaching at Home: "Mr. Knuckles" Becomes "Mr. Knucklehead"

Trent Davis

St. Mary's University, Calgary, Alberta

Almost seventy years ago, philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote an essay with the realistic yet hopeful title *Education for a Difficult World*. He claimed that one of the things that makes life "very difficult" is the struggle "not to feel that there is something quite special and peculiar about one's own misfortunes."¹ The remedy to such a depressing and narcissistic misreading of our situation, he continued, and incidentally one of the premier benefits of education, involves learning to acknowledge that we are not so special after all. In other words, we can come to understand that our troubles, even if they feel distinctly ours, are actually quite commonplace. In the final tally, they are largely an inevitable part of the human lot.

Russell's bracing educational insight is worth pondering in our current educational context, since over the past several months parents have been herding their children to sit dutifully around the family table to participate in teaching at home (which I believe derives from the Latin root *frustrationem*). In what follows, I openly share a despondent story from my own experiments with this practice as a message of reassurance that the ensuing frustration on the part of everyone involved was not (entirely) anyone's fault. At the end, I also offer a few insights about what we have learned about teaching and learning in an age of Covid-19 that we ought to hold on to as a society going forward.

I should establish from the start that my credentials for undertaking this endeavour are solid enough to put an oar in the water: I am an associate professor of education who has been working with teacher-candidates for almost twenty years. Before that, I completed a Bachelor of Education degree and partly paid my way through grad school by supply-teaching through schools in the greater Toronto area. My research speciality today is the philosophy of education. For the most part, this means I spend my days asking future teachers to write clearly and argue well, while waging a losing battle with the immediacy of social media to convince anyone who will listen that the past has something to offer the present and future. More personally, I am the proud father of eight-year-old twin girls, who are currently in grade 2 in a French Immersion school.

Like most tragedies, this story begins ominously. The schools in my home province closed in response to an infectious and deadly virus spread through close human contact. After a few weeks hunkered down at home, the local school board sent us a notice that learning would apparently continue through the environs of a computer software program called "D2L," which is the optimistically short form for, "Desire to Learn."

After locating the right portal and retrieving the appropriate passwords, I logged on to check out how things were organized. The approach was simple enough: students were to complete as many suggested activities as they liked, while two-to-three were marked as mandatory and would involve submitting evidence of their completion on the Friday of each week. I tried to hype

the experience by calling it "daddy school," and in an effort to convey the serious nature of all educational efforts, especially the discipline required, my name would be "Mr. Knuckles." The girls found this amusing, and for the first few days would ask me with anticipation when we would be doing "daddy school" and when "Mr. Knuckles" would be showing up.

The story starts to leave the preferred script around week three. There was one particular day that stands out for me as a crucial turning point. The girls were growing increasingly restless, and I was having to use more and more energy to get them to focus on the curriculum, which incidentally comes from the Latin *currere*, which loosely and charmingly translates to "obstacle course." In any event, under the tab for Social Studies we clicked on a presentation devoted to Saskatchewan, since provinces of Canada is part of the curriculum. The slide that made us pause was a picture of a lone prairie dog staring back at us, with the caption "*un chien de prairie*" written underneath. Immediately, my daughters had several questions: why was the prairie dog alone, how could you tell a girl from a boy prairie dog, do people have them as pets, what would be a good name for a prairie dog? This went on for longer than one might think.

Finally, having had enough of Saskatchewan, we turned to the French language assignment, which involved listening to a song in French and then answering questions on a quiz. The song was called "*l'ananas dansant*," which in English means "the dancing pineapple." We never even made it out of the first chorus – waves of laughter erupted from all three of us, and I suspect we could not resist recognizing the absurdity of where we were together in that moment.

I would like to say that this was just a small interruption in an otherwise positive learning experience, but I would be lying. Increasingly, my daughters complained that the assigned work was "boring," and I was growing increasingly irritated that I was having to invest so much energy to get them to focus on anything school related. The boiling point came on a wet and cold day when I was sterner than usual to get them to pay attention and to knock off the hyperactive laughter. The end result was sad but predictable: the girls started crying. I felt miserable and stressed, and one of my daughters turned to me and said softly through tears "this is not school."

"You are right," I continued, and after an embarrassed apology and a perfunctory "that's enough for today" my daughters scrambled away, and I knew I had to rethink what was happening. I turned to my wife, who helped me to see that something had gone wrong. Talking to friends who have children in the same age range revealed a similar pattern, and increasingly social media was revealing that we were not the only family dismayed by the experience of teaching at home. A few days later my mother in-law asked how "daddy school" was going, and then she mistakenly called me "Mr. Knucklehead." The girls seized upon the new name with gusto, but I immediately realized that the new name fit perfectly.

As a friend and colleague pointed out to me in the context of his own struggles in this context, it is always important to maintain the right relationship between "schooling" and "education." This is a common and long-standing distinction among educators. Basically, the first term typically refers to all the institutional demands set out in the curricular "program of studies," along with the social dimensions of attending school with other human beings. The latter denotes the quality

of the educational experience of the learner, frequently measured as "growth" in terms of changes in thought, feeling and behaviour. Ideally "schooling" should promote "education" in the best sense, but sometimes it does not.

The strategy we ended up adopting was to do the mandatory "school" bits each week, and then find other ways to engage our daughters for the benefit of their "education." Since the weather was warming up, we started heading outdoors more frequently. We also created "LEGO city" in the basement by bringing the nine billion pieces of LEGO spread throughout the house into one central location. We took turns reading to each other and bought a Nintendo Switch. It took a few days, but the general consensus was that I was the worst at videogames in the entire family, with the *possible* exception of the cat.

By finding things my daughters were interested in, I was able to engage them and create more genuine dialogue about what they were thinking and feeling. I also came to appreciate that even though they could not verbalize it, the situation was hard for them too. They were missing the structure and friendships of school, and my wife and I provided all the reassurance and age-appropriate information we could. But to be perfectly honest, we still cannot shake the anxiety-generating thought that no one really and fully understands yet what has happened and the toll the shutdown will take on everyone in the long term.

Mercifully the school year came to a silent end, and we did not have to submit anything anymore. If we have all learned anything from all of this, it is that parents are not teachers (not even those who were or are teachers), at least not in the immediate sense that term implies. Of course, I want to teach my daughters all the essential things about life as I watch them grow and unfold, but a "schooling" context, especially in terms of relationships with peers and teachers, is vital. Going forward as a society, I strongly suggest we have to acknowledge that reducing the quality of educational "experience" to covering curricular "schooling" content online is simply inadequate. Everyone needs and deserves better if "schooling" and "education" can keep Russell's hope alive by contributing to this increasingly "difficult" world we share².

¹ Bertrand Russell, *Fact and Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 145.

² I would like to thank my wife, Emma Langeveld, and my colleagues and friends Cory Wright-Maley, Tim Harvie, and Michael MacLeod for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Trent Davis is an Associate Professor of Education at St. Mary's University in Calgary, Alberta. Correspondence relating to this article can be sent to trent.davis@stmu.ca