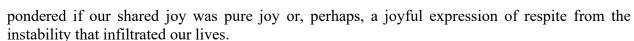# BLACK BEARS AND VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

By Melissa Bishop
University of Prince Edward Island

Je vois mes amis! Bonjour! Je suis tres content de te voir! As students enter our French Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), I cheerfully greet each child, along with siblings, parents, and even family pets, using "Je vois" (I see) followed by their name. This ritual became routine during emergency pandemic teaching, as educators, parents, and students gathered in their virtual classrooms from the (dis)comfort of home. One student excitedly shouts out: *Mme, Mme, Mme, look! My Nana came for a porch visit on the weekend, and she brought me ours* (bear in French). Our VLE classroom had been discussing hibernation and the habitats of living things. The child squeezing the stuffed bear had become enthralled with bear habitats and shared this newfound passion with their Nana over a nightly FaceTime call. Tiny hands clasped the middle of a stubby, chocolate-coloured, stuffed bear. Its doe-like eyes and leathery black nose grew more prominent as the child thrust the bear too close to the webcam lens to make out clearly. *Oh wow, je vois un ours!* I call out to the myriad of kindergarten faces, all leaning close to their webcam lenses, hoping to get a clearer view of the stuffed bear held up by their classmate. Despite our physical distance through the glitches, a frozen screen, and a dimly lit room, I felt our shared joy in that virtual moment. These experiences of synchronous teaching cause memories to resurface. The same excitement of being *seen* by an adult through a screen mirrored that of my sister hearing her name called and feeling *seen* some 30 years earlier.

I am transported to a late 1980s living room, its wood-paneled walls and brown-and-orange floral couches bathed in morning light. A sizeable octagonal coffee table dominates the space, and the plush brown-and-beige carpet, both soft and scratchy, presses against my toes. With a bowl of cereal in hand, I shuffle to my usual spot on the floor, settling in front of the floor-model television. The wood-burning stove, framed by a handmade stone backsplash, radiates warmth and the faint scent of a campfire. Between slurps of milk and soggy Wayne Gretzky ProStars cereal, my sister and I, clad in fuzzy pyjamas, hang onto every word from the woman with bright red lipstick. Her magic mirror reflects the unseen audience, and she recites the same two words, followed by a name: "I see James, I see Sara, I see Amanda." A delighted shriek breaks the moment: "That's my name! She sees me! She said my name!" My younger sister's gleeful outburst marks the highlight of our Saturday morning — the chance to hear our names called on *Romper Room*. I linger in this memory, recognizing the echoes of those childhood Saturdays in my present-day teaching. Just as we once waited eagerly for acknowledgment, my students light up at the sound of their names, affirming the simple yet profound joy of being seen.

Moments like these played out in the VLE over the school year. Warmed by the connection we nurtured and despite pandemic measures that drastically changed the spaces we inhabited, I was seeing elements of humanness—a rehumanizing perhaps (Lyle & Caissie, 2021)—in a virtual platform that was novel, strange, and unmapped territory reaching beyond the borderlands of what teaching once was. I noted that my desperate attempts to build a sense of humanness, care, and compassion in the seemingly paradoxical virtual space became realized in moments of shared joy. In considering the future and sustainability of VLEs for young learners, I spent time in deep contemplation and introspection in moments of joy, frustration, anger, sadness, and excitement. I

pondered if our shared joy was pure joy or, perhaps, a joyful expression of respite from the instability that infiltrated our lives.

Here, I draw upon my VLE curricular experiences, taking up Pinar's (1975) method of *currere*, engaging in a researcher-as-participant role, and flowing through and among four moments: the regressive, progressive, synthetical, and analytical. Through this process, I critically examine the interconnectedness of my past educational experiences, contemplate an imagined future composed of my past experiences and future desires grounded in the "historical, social, cultural, and political contexts through which they emerge; and … synthesize my thinking across these moments" (Baszile, 2017, p. vi). The interconnectedness of each moment shaped my internal teacher dialogue, a dialogue that drastically changed at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following sections, through my *currerian* experience(s), I invite you to ponder teachers' narratives, how they bump up against socio-political narratives and the tensions embedded within the VLE.

Black Bear Cubs: Early VLE Experiences

After several years of teaching in VLEs from kindergarten to post-secondary, I noted the changes in how I imagined the future of VLEs, particularly for kindergarten learners. The imagined future of the VLE took on several transformations, as did I, as I moved between and among several imagined teacher personas. I meditated on what may come (Pinar, 1995) and looked toward what was not yet present in VLEs and the temporal changes over three years.

In my first year of VLE teaching, like a bear cub in early spring, I stumbled through the VLE, persisting. Consistent guidelines for teachers, parents, families, adult supporters, and students were lacking. By the second year, I had a strong understanding of navigating the platforms, as did students. In the third year, it became evident that successful implementation of VLEs required more support. I sit in quiet contemplation, imagining the potential futures of VLEs for young learners. As I ponder, I remember the phrases repeated in coffee shops, classrooms, teachers' lounges, and in several of the Ministry of Educations' public statements: *students are behind*; *we need to catch them up*; *COVID ruined learning, my kid/niece/nephew/grandchild/etc. is behind*. Each of these deepened the cut as I imagined the future of VLEs, the potential to be a sustainable educational experience where students, for health, wellbeing, or familial circumstances, could benefit from a well-designed virtual learning environment. I had embraced creating a curriculum of care (Noddings, 2015), teaching with compassion and humanness in a space that was not familiar, and yet there was a sense of disgust for teaching and learning in VLEs. In this moment, I began imagining the future of VLEs and reflected on the scribbles from my teaching notebook.

My teaching notebooks are spaces where I jot, scribble, doodle, and make anecdotal notes of inspiring, thought-provoking, challenging, and sometimes seemingly ridiculous ideas. As I read through the memories, I noted the expanse of imagined futures I recorded and what the VLE could do and possibly become. However, with each anecdotal musing, the "students are behind" catchphrase appears over and over with a scribbled arrow pointing to my familiar handwriting; *what if they are ahead? What if the social skills they have developed in the virtual sphere and the knowledge of digital privacy (VPNs, etc.) far exceeds their peers in the traditional classroom environment? What if we can do education differently, embedding much-needed technological skills with a human element, and expose students to deep learning in the VLE rather than rote*

repetition? What if students who continue in a VLE apply their tech skills (amongst others) and leverage technology for social justice or develop their skills to be drivers of change (i.e., water crisis, education of girls worldwide, the unhoused, or precariously housed)? What if these students have the technology skills to leverage and bring awareness to social justice issues that they are passionate about? I saw students who had learned to engage in critical digital literacy, saw injustices worldwide, and advocated for change. *What if they are the generation to drive change if they are guided rather than perceived as empty slates to be filled with seemingly democratic (Apple, 2018) mandated curricular knowledge positioned as the worthiest?*

What if, like the black bear cubs changing with the temporal seasons, the season for VLEs is now? Of the imagined futures, I hold tight to the possibility of hope and change within the virtual learning experience, where learning is facilitated and embodied rather than strictly a space for knowledge dissemination.

BLACK BEARS & VIRTUAL TEACHERS: SOLITARY, MASTERS OF ADAPTATION

According to Ontario Parks (2023), black bears are solitary animals that are masters of adaptation, characteristics I found within myself as I transitioned to the VLE and transformed our tiny home office into a makeshift classroom. Like the black bear, I taught alone, miles away from my colleagues who, only weeks before, had been 15 feet across the hall. Once a collaborative endeavor, teaching became isolating and solitary as educators began to fumble around the virtual space, preparing lessons for this novel teaching experience. I reminisced about the cream-colored cement walls in a staffroom spotted with second-hand furniture and union posters. No longer were there collegial chats about upcoming events, and the collective lunchtime smells once emitted from the two microwaves perched precariously on a rickety table were replaced by a bleach-like smell. The once full staffroom brimming with educators, now abandoned and left in the wake, accompanied an anxious feeling coupled with hope.

Despite the warming nostalgia, I eagerly adapted and embraced the VLE, optimistic about its potential and implications for future students and educators (Caprara & Caprara, 2022). My optimism was met with frustration as I began consuming as much literature as possible to determine the best possible practices for students; however, the research was sparse, particularly in regards to VLEs and the three- to six-year-old students I taught. In this regressive moment, I began to reflect deeply on my educational experience and overlay it with the present VLE teaching conditions (Pinar et al., 1995). I built my VLE program by drawing upon mandated curricular outcomes to plan student learning experiences. I embraced the nostalgia and sought ways to connect with teachers worldwide, building a collaborative network missing from the VLE. We engaged in deep reflective practices to master VLEs for our school district's youngest learners.

Engaging in an introspective pause (Adams & Buffington-Adams, 2020), a solitary practice, I unlocked the multilayered lived experiences embedded in my VLE teaching with a sense of possibility. Although not without challenges, the VLE required significant adaptability from educators—a skill many educators, I like to think, inherently possess. I began to build a repertoire of digital skills in the first few months of VLE teaching with like-minded educators who saw the possibility of teaching and learning online in the early years. However, worry clouded my excitement in seeing the VLE come to life in a semblance of classroom community. I had the privilege and ability to adapt to the VLE quickly. I had a reasonably reliable Wi-Fi connection, a laptop, and three monitors, all haphazardly connected by HDMI cords. I could *see* students on a

large TV monitor while presenting lessons on another. I was fortunate to continue to have an income, easily accessible food, and a yard in which to exercise or enjoy the fresh air. My living conditions mirrored some families I saw in my daily teaching interactions. However, other families struggled to meet their basic needs during this tumultuous time. As colleagues and I shared our concerns alongside the possibilities, the layers of our conversations revealed a deeper level of impoverishment than we had realized was present in the physical classroom. *Seeing* first-hand the makeshift workspaces of students provided a deeper insight into the lives of families as their child(ren) entered the synchronous VLE from living rooms, kitchen tables, and car seats as students accompanied parents on deliveries or to work. Many students shared tiny spaces with multiple siblings. I witnessed older children thrust into caregiver roles, taking charge while parents worked. Although I was fortunate enough to easily adapt and cope with the seemingly solitary nature of the VLE, it was readily apparent that student and educator experiences were quite varied.

Shifting my contemplation to the progressive, I examined the adaptations students and their families would need to make as we progressed through the school year in the VLE. Some families were fortunate to have access to a cottage, others remained in tiny apartments, and yet others moved into intergenerational homes to survive. Students whose families owned cottages in rural areas sent pictures and videos after driving to the "dump" (garbage landfill) to watch the black bears as a part of our bear inquiry. One student noted, "*Mme there's beaucoup (a lot) ours in the dump this year.*" In stark contrast, I was also privy to students' homes, where I saw bare cupboards and refrigerators filled once every few weeks with a trip to the local food bank. I received emails from parents as student absences and the demand for parents to work multiple shifts increased. I was acutely aware of the perpetual anxieties of students, families, and teachers as they coped with being physically distanced from each other. In these moments, I began to imagine the future of VLEs and pulled at the threads of what appeared to be a democratic curriculum that had been purported to be beneficial for all (Apple, 2018). However, the standardized curriculum set forth to create a collective consciousness willfully ignored the visible differences and needs evident in the VLE.

BLACK, BARE CUPBOARDS: POVERTY & POLICY

Black bears are known for their hibernation habits, gorging on food in the autumn to sustain them through a winter sleep. I likened this to my experiences harvesting crops from the garden and preparing them for the long winter ahead. In stark contrast, synchronous learning placed me in the homes of impoverished students whose families struggled to fill cupboards with food. These students, much like the black bear, went without meals to make their food staples last longer. They relied on community gardens in the spring for berries and root vegetables in the autumn. Families relied heavily on food banks, free resources, and donations to ensure their children had a semblance of a meal each day. I excavate the political and institutional narratives guiding decision-making processes in this synthetical realm. I reflect on how we (students, educators, parents) are tethered to political and institutional decision-making narratives that directly impact student and teachers' well-being, including hunger and black, bare cupboards.

The political and institutional narratives that guide the decision-making processes in Ontario VLEs derive from Policy and Program Memorandum 164 (PPM 164, Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020). PPM 164 requires teachers to provide 300 minutes of learning opportunities, including small group, individual, whole group, and independent work grounded in the Ontario

Curriculum. The document further states that synchronous instruction for Kindergarten programs must consist of 180 minutes, while grades one to three must include 225 minutes. The memorandum indicates that, to ensure educators are well-equipped, teachers will receive training in remote learning strategies to effectively use digital tools, pedagogy and assessment, student and staff mental health and wellbeing, and differentiated instruction in the virtual classroom.

The policy favors synchronous learning while minimizing the importance of asynchronous learning. As I reflect(ed) and pull(ed) at the threads embedded in the policy, flexibility in instructional modes that responded to student needs was not evident. Specific to my situation, kindergarten teachers were to embed play-based learning and inquiry-based learning in their programming seamlessly. However, the lack of flexibility in the curriculum delivery modes disadvantaged me and other early years teachers (McKay & Redford, 2021; Ramu et al., 2022), leading many teachers to revert to digital worksheet-based activities in their VLE programming. Digging deeper into the policy and its implications, the focus on synchronous learning with little flexibility ignores research indicating daily synchronous learning requirements exceed the recommended screen time for young learners (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2019; Trembley et al., 2016). Although PPM 164 addresses screen time and instructional elements of online teaching, the policy does not directly discuss the well-being of students and teachers.

Conversely, Caprara and Caprara (2022) argued that teachers are in a precarious position when synchronous learning is favored but purported as optional—parents can opt their child out of synchronous learning in favor of asynchronous learning in VLEs. Pulling apart the entanglements of synchronous vs. asynchronous learning, I noted that students who learned asynchronously became disconnected from peers and missed opportunities to build relationships in the virtual sphere. However, students who chose synchronous learning contended with the guidelines proposed by the Canadian Paediatric Society (2019) regarding screen time. It became clear that, at an institutional level, the capacity to provide virtual learning on a mass scale, attend to diverse student needs, follow screen time guidelines, and meet the ethical standards of care required further development (Barbour et al., 2013).

SURVIVING THE WINTER: ANALYSIS & POSSIBILITY

Like the Romper Room Story of my childhood, students and teachers are now *seen* in the VLE in a way that was not previously present. We exposed our vulnerable selves through a camera view into our homes. Students and teachers living in poverty, with food insecurity, mental health challenges, and in need of support bared their vulnerable selves to what felt like the whole world. Being vulnerable also opened space for understanding, connection, empathy, and care—all elements that were not evident in the policy documents that guided the VLE implementation process. Bleary-eyed, I would call out to students in hopes of letting them know they are seen. At times, the tears pushed the boundaries of my eyes as parents lost steady employment, struggled to provide necessities, or those who, despite all attempts, could not access services for their child, overshadowed the curricular outcomes and PPM 164 directives.

As I work towards the analytical, a space I currently occupy, I consider the synthesis of acting in the world (Pinar, 2015). While the VLE posed numerous challenges, it also revealed unexpected joys. I witnessed students' resilience and creativity, learning to embrace the VLE as a space of possibility. I carry these lessons with me as I continue to teach, although now in a post-secondary space, and I begin to draw parallels between emergency remote teaching and offering

asynchronous programming for adults. What is clear to me is that teaching virtually requires flexibility, unlike the in-person classroom, while also maintaining a connection and developing a community amongst learners.

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