

The Builder Analogy: Teaching During a Pandemic



“Oh, you’re a teacher? How’s that going this year?”

Teaching is notoriously difficult to describe, even in the best of times. It’s hard to balance the joy and satisfaction I often feel with the very real and unique challenges that can make the job feel anywhere from appropriately taxing to soul-crushing and undoable.

Trying to describe what that job has become during a pandemic? Well, I’m not even sure it’s possible, but it will definitely require the usage of a literary device. To paint you a picture, let’s imagine teachers are builders. Their job is to spend each year building apartment buildings whose foundations and frames are made up of a rigorous curriculum, a healthy classroom culture and meaningful connections with members of the community. These buildings are custom made by each builder to best serve their unique tenants, the students.

I am a proud builder. Like many builders, I have spent years honing my craft. There are many factors to consider, and I constantly make mistakes. Frankly, I’m not sure it’s even possible to make an apartment building that is best suited to the needs of all my tenants with the resources available to me and to them. That said, I know that I’ve made a lot of progress creating apartment buildings that are, for the most part, comfortable, welcoming, accessible, and affordable. My apartments are generally well received, and each year I’m a little prouder of the final product.

This year, someone burned all my blueprints, stole all my power tools, and switched out all the building materials that I was used to using. Standing there with a cheap hammer and some questionable-looking plywood, I was told, “Sorry this happened, but we’re all counting on you to make your apartment building this year just as good as what we’ve grown used to.”

There may have been some tears.

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But I’m a gosh darn builder. All I know how to do is build. So I have been building.

Everything takes longer, works less well, and is substantially less satisfying. I am constantly worried about my tenants because they too have new and complex challenges and I have fewer tools than ever to help them. It constantly feels like there is a long line of people walking past my build site, muttering under their breath: “Wow, this neighborhood has really gone downhill. The apartments used to be so much better.”

I am tired. Bone tired.

But when you’re forced into a situation that necessitates making a lot of random choices just to see what happens, you pay attention to your craft in a different way. So what have I gained from this massive, horrible DIY project?

I look much more carefully at the work being done by other builders.

Before this year, I’ve always had a pretty well-fleshed-out blueprint to fall back on. I knew generally what was expected of me, and I wanted to learn how to use all the tools myself. I knew that other builders could be great resources, and I consulted them from time to time, but I truly believed that no apartment building could be better than the one I built myself. I didn’t like to share decision making, and I hated working around someone else’s time table. I had a vision and I was,

for the most part, unwilling to compromise it. In my mind, really good builders could figure it out on their own.

But I am here to tell you I do not have this new normal figured out. It's a coin flip whether something that I add to the apartment will help my tenants or completely escape their notice. I spend a lot of time wondering if they're even in the building. As a result, I have finally started to really look at what other builders are doing. We are all navigating equally insufficient materials and no one is claiming that what they are creating is perfect, but there is so much to learn from the subtle differences. Instead of dismissing a whole building as "not my style," I am starting to find things I love: great windows, interesting lobbies, better use of space, and more individualized rooms. I am more humble and less critical. I am learning to look at what someone else has created with a more open mind—and the more I do, the more great things I find. I've even started to try some of the fancy architecture I really thought I'd have to scrap this year.

I have a greater appreciation for amenities.

I've always focused on the apartments themselves (in this analogy, my content). That's the whole point, right? The actual living spaces. Surely that's what everyone most cares about and will find the most impressive when I post pictures on Zillow.

I am here to tell you I do not have this new normal figured out.

This year the actual apartments are all I have and I cannot lie, I have a whole new appreciation for the amenities. I used to resent the landscaping (sports) that took students out of my apartment buildings at odd hours. Now I would give anything for some of my wilting tenants to be able to roll around on the lawn with their friends five hours before they actually need to be there. In the before times, I wasn't quite sure why we were spending so much time sprucing up conference rooms (social events like dances, rallies, spirit weeks, etc.), when only a certain subset of tenants, most of whom were already doing pretty well, really seemed to enjoy meeting in them. Now I would happily watch some of my more enthusiastic

tenants wow me with a PowerPoint presentation I only minimally comprehend and feel slightly uncomfortable watching. Old me thought the lobby (lunch and breaks) was just a default feature people had to pass through to get to other things. New and improved me now values what a big difference a quick chat in the lobby can make to a tenant, and to me!

I am more patient with and curious about my tenants.

When my thriving apartment building was burnt down in March of 2020, I was given two sticks and a tarp for each of my tenants.

I don't blame anyone for this; no one knew how to handle the new normal and my district was much more reasonable than most. For me, that looked like 100% asynchronous instruction. I had to post weekly assignments, make video tutorials to explain how to do them, and remain "available" during normal school hours for students who had clarifying questions. Turns out no structure is not enough structure for the average teenager. Around 30% of my tenants just disappeared, and I was really worried about how many would be willing to come back this year. I was pleasantly surprised. So many of them willingly moved in. They brought plants, quirky furniture, and paint. They added their own life and little touches to the space. Some even commented, "I really love this building, thank you for all the hard work you put in to rebuild it."

Some of my tenants have been a harder sell. They didn't like apartment living in the first place, and the ramshackle structure I had created this year wasn't really changing their mind. Even once they moved in, they occasionally left trash in the hallway or skipped a rent payment (rent = effort). But, at the end of the day, I was grateful to have them and they were grateful to have me.

Then there were tenants who never came. They never crossed the street; heck, some didn't even come back to the neighborhood! I kept asking for advice and adding features that might make the apartment more enticing. I put up billboards, I held open the door, I even offered to pay 90% of their rent if only they would move in! Every time someone emailed me to ask me what I was doing to bring back missing tenants, I gesticulated wildly and replied, "I don't know what else you want me to do; the rent is practically FREE. I have never required less rent."

It took time for me to lower my defensive barriers. When I did, I looked outside. There were still many potential tenants I had no way of reaching. They matter, and I hope they come back—but by focusing on them, I had missed the two or three who had been sitting on the porch this whole time, occasionally ringing the doorbell, sometimes even stepping into the reception area. They had a lot of reasons for not being ideal tenants and, to be honest, there are a lot of tenants I still don't know how to build for. I'm tired and I've done a lot, but this pandemic won't last forever—I hope that I can keep holding open the door and asking if they would like to come inside.

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