



What next? Where do we go?

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Abstract

This paper describes the immediate experiences of a lecturer who, with her family, was displaced during the war. After finding safety outside of Ukraine, teaching resumed via Zoom. The teacher created a purposefully ‘safe’ space online for students to participate.

Keywords

displacement, teaching in wartime, online teaching, pedagogy of care

Just as I was about to go to bed, my American friend sent me a message: “Oksana, something bad is about to happen.” I brushed it off—Americans always exaggerate.

I woke up to an explosion, but wasn’t too frightened—this is Kyiv, a big city, anything can happen. After the second explosion, I went to the window and saw people in the building across the street running to the parking lot with kids and bags. I picked up my phone—messages from other American friends were pouring in, filled with fear, concern, and care.

I opened the news and understood: it had started. I woke my daughter up and asked her to take her schoolbooks out of her backpack and pack enough clothes for about a week. I had a plan—to go to our friends in Zakarpattia.

We packed quickly and drove to my parents’ house to leave our cat. My mother asked just one question: “Will you come back?” I was certain I’d leave my daughter with our friends and return home. Around that time, messages began coming in from my daughter’s school and the Academy saying that war had started and classes were cancelled for now.

There was already a traffic collapse; it was impossible to leave Kyiv. Gas stations weren’t working, and you couldn’t use a bank card to buy even a snack. Seven or eight hours later, we had only made it to the outskirts of Kyiv, where tanks were already stationed and soldiers stood everywhere. My daughter asked me to stop the car, jumped out, and gave all her treats to the soldiers in the tank.

It was getting dark. We had just exited Kyiv. I was worried—what next? Where do we go? Where do we sleep? How do I keep us from being alone on the road at night? Suddenly, just before a turn to the small town of Nemishaeve, a relative messaged me—her parents lived there, and the whole family had gathered. She asked if we wanted to join. At that

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moment, I felt a wave of relief. We wouldn't be alone. There were men there, eight people in total, a house with a fence. We could sleep there. So we turned off the road.

That night, Russian paratroopers landed there. And then came hell. We were in the middle of active fighting, running to the cellar. We took shifts watching at night. I covered my child with my body. On the third day, electricity, internet, water, and heating were gone. It snowed a little, and we collected snow under gunfire to use as water. We tried to ration food. The children ate twice a day, adults—just once.

Then the Russians occupied the village. It was clear we wouldn't survive. The most painful thing was knowing my child had no future.

On the morning of March 7, the homeowner received a call from a priest saying a few cars would try to leave—did we want to go? We had five minutes to decide: stay and understand that we would be killed, or take the risk to leave. At the time, we didn't know what horrors were happening in Bucha and Irpin just 10 kilometres away—only that they were occupied and the bridge was blown up.

Wearing whatever we had, we got into the cars. I tied white sheets as makeshift white flags, wrote "CHILDREN" on paper, and taped it to the windows. There was a line of cars waiting to pass the Russian checkpoint. Tanks were parked along the road, firing, to make sure no one would try to run. Driving through the grey zone was terrifying—too terrifying to describe. I don't want to remember what we saw.

When we reached the Ukrainian checkpoint, a soldier gave my daughter an apple. She held onto it for days, unable to eat it.

Then came Lviv, Svaliava, Hungary, Warsaw. The next few weeks felt like a fog. But I had to find my students, learn where they were, how they were doing, and somehow resume classes. Thank God, all my students were alive and happy to see each other on Zoom.

Our first meeting was just talking. Then we needed a plan. But most important was their emotional state. We agreed: if someone wasn't feeling up to it, they didn't have to join class. If they had no strength, they could leave their camera off. They could always message me privately—we would figure everything out. My main goal was to create a safe space for them, to help them survive emotionally. Only after that came the actual academic program.

We met according to the schedule, dedicated part of the lessons to meaningful topics, part to the curriculum. I tried to assign interesting, creative tasks to distract them from dark thoughts and worries. I allowed silence during lessons, or working in pairs with those they felt most comfortable with. I wrote to each student who didn't join class to make sure they were okay. I asked them to go somewhere safer during air raids.

Nothing at university prepares us for this. That's why it's so important to stay flexible, think critically, show empathy, and above all—remain a human being that students can come to not only for subject-related questions, but with anything at all.