

Teacher Voices: Collaboration is Key to Remote Learning Challenges



If we think about it, our world and how we manage our daily lives has changed dramatically since COVID-19 became our new reality—from purchasing more products online to having telemedicine conferences with our physicians. When it comes to teaching—whether it’s college, high school, or elementary—it all boils down to adapting to a whole new era of virtual “long-distance” learning. The adaptations vary from teacher to professor—some feel more comfortable with technology and adapt to change easily. Other instructors might face challenges that are out of their control, such as lack of technological resources, and must work with what they have or is available to them. I call it “long-distance” learning because it is reciprocal: teachers learn as we go and some of our students teach us valuable technology tips!

I remember my last day of in-person instruction like it was yesterday; Friday March 13, 2020! COVID-19 closures hit us by surprise and we had to adapt to a new way of instruction and do the best we could under such challenging

circumstances. At that point, Zoom became the online teaching platform for many school districts, including mine. The end of the 2019–2020 school year became a trial and error sort of year for teaching virtually. I had to learn to laugh at my own mistakes during my first experience with Zoom in the spring of 2020. At that time, I would connect with my students a couple of times a week and we would have very condensed English language arts and math lessons. Then I would follow up with them on Google Classroom to assign them their independent work. I was learning and laughing at my mistakes: I didn't learn how to share the sound from videos in Zoom until the last week of school in June! It was just a matter of clicking on a little square at the bottom that read "share my sound" whenever I shared my screen with them. When my husband showed me this, I could not believe how easy it was and I had missed it! Teaching remotely was a constant challenge and the only way to overcome it was through professional development and collaboration.

I definitely learned from that mistake and others along the way. After hours of summer training on different learning apps and platforms, I tuned up my technology skills and learned to multitask digitally, so to speak. Once I started with my new third-grade class in the fall of 2020, I was able to create Zoom breakout rooms during intervention time. Ms. Bridgett, a "Read with Me" volunteer, connected twice a week to provide reading support to all of my students in groups of four to five at a time. I also had a tutor who would connect on different days to work with my migrant students. Meanwhile, I went over other skills the rest of the class needed to review or we learned about a new application. Now I can say that I have come a long way since the pandemic started in March of 2020.

MAGIC HAPPENS

Part of adapting to this new era was getting comfortable sitting in the passenger's seat and, at times, letting the students take the lead. This was when the magic began to happen in my class. There are always student leaders that want to take the initiative to try something new, especially when it comes to technology. Usually at the end of the day, we tried a new app. I asked for a volunteer to

demonstrate the steps of how to log in by allowing them to share their screen. This way, the rest of the class got the “student view” of what they are supposed to do. For instance, there was this very interactive math app called Dreambox in which students were presented with opportunities to practice their math skills. This app had the format of a game with high quality graphics where they got to advance levels and earn points and rewards. I would choose at least three volunteers to take turns modeling how to play with the different math skills, such as rounding to the nearest 100 on a number line. The number line showed a frog jumping on a pond and the student had to enter the estimated number of jumps it would take to reach that rounded amount. This is only one example (out of many) of when students stepped in and assisted the class.

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As another example, I gave them a group assignment where they worked collaboratively and a leader in each group acted as a facilitator. These facilitators shared their screen to display the whiteboard and wrote a math problem to solve. In these “Number Talks,” they each shared their strategies and reasoning behind how to solve a math equation. We used breakout rooms and when I joined each group to check on them, I was amazed at how much they were learning from each other! Teaching virtually has allowed me to see different facets of myself, as well. I am a spectator at times, but I jump in and clarify if needed. I am also a facilitator, a coach, a counselor, and I have developed stronger relationships with my students and their parents.

Another positive aspect of teaching virtually is the high level of collaboration that has been developing among teachers, even across grade levels. Mrs. Walker, my son’s kindergarten teacher, shared her very animated Bitmoji Google slides for certain holidays. For example, she shared an interactive slide with the Christmas tree and decorations, a cozy fireplace, and a puppy chewing on a toy, to make it

fun for the students. It also had links to read alouds that they could access during the winter break. Mrs. Lopez-Lowe, a close friend of mine who teaches fifth grade, and I share a lot of resources with each other on Google Drive. She helped me organize my third grade Google slides for each subject that I teach my students. Having my slides in order and with the links relevant to each subject saved me time, thus making my lessons more interactive and effective. Each slide has my Bitmoji either standing pointing at the board or sitting. My physical education class slide has workout equipment and one of the posters has the link to gonoodle.com, the website I use for fun exercise videos. More importantly, it gave my students the virtual experience of being in the classroom. It has definitely been an exchange of ideas, digital resources, and people actually putting in the time to help out their colleagues.

CHALLENGES AT THE COLLEGE LEVEL AND IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

In an email conversation with Dr. Sonia Guillen, my former professor of Spanish and Linguistics at California State University-San Bernardino, she shared that at the beginning of this pandemic, she had a hard time learning all the ins and outs of Blackboard, an online teaching platform. Not only that, but she also had to learn how to conduct Zoom meetings with her students in a short period of time. She wrote she was very thankful that her colleague, Dr. Bibiana Diaz, a professor from the same Spanish Department, took the time to teach her how to navigate Blackboard and how to conduct Zoom meetings successfully. Dr. Diaz spent a total of 60 hours teaching her these online skills! I am truly amazed at this level of collaboration at the university level.

The switch to virtual learning has required all teachers to learn new skills, while trying to stay a step ahead of our students and keep them engaged, which is much harder to do when they are not sitting

in front of us. But it has also helped us see the generosity of our fellow teachers and the creativity and initiative of many of our students.

Another amazing teaching story comes from my husband's aunt, Ms. Laura Lo Giudice, who is a teacher to a combined class of fourth and fifth grade students in Rosario de Santa Fe, Argentina. Over a Zoom meeting, she shared how difficult it was to continue to teach her students when the pandemic first broke out.

Unfortunately, in her area, they didn't have the technology resources to make virtual learning accessible. Due to the lack of funds in the area, they couldn't provide internet to students nor electronic devices. She remarked that many families tend to have only one device per home and that it is usually a prepaid phone. From that phone, students would have to use their prepaid minutes to complete assignments she posted on a Facebook page and in two WhatsApp groups. She created packets for students who didn't have internet access that they could pick up at their local library. In addition, the local TV network had a program of lessons for all elementary and middle school students that would be played at different scheduled times. She is now on a hybrid model—cohort "A" is taught in person, while cohort "B" completes the same lessons at home. She posts the work on the WhatsApp application. The following week, the cohorts rotate. This way, all the students are covering the same material and she can move both groups along at the same pace. This is another example of a challenging situation that was overcome by the community collaborating to make learning possible! It is truly admirable how teachers are collaborating and making "long-distance" learning work and finding creative ways to overcome technical challenges and a serious lack of resources to keep the educational process going for their students. The switch to virtual learning has required all teachers to learn new skills, while trying to stay a step ahead of our students and keep them engaged, which is much harder to do when they are not sitting in front of us. But it has also helped us see the generosity of our fellow teachers and the creativity and initiative of many of

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