

COVID-19 Online Learning: Thriving and Surviving

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Abstract

The purpose of this reflection of teaching online through the COVID-19 outbreak is to shed light on the importance of setting middle school students up for success despite being thrust into an unfamiliar virtual, learning environment. The personal narrative speaks to the ways in which I set up a new online learning environment with structure, consistency, and care. Students and parents learned fairly quickly what needed to be done to ensure success. I learned fairly quickly that some students needed more support academically and emotionally just like in the classroom. Those students that merely survived in the classroom also survived in their new online learning setting, and those students that thrived in the classroom also thrived in their new online learning setting.

Keywords: remote learning; COVID-19 teaching

Introduction

When it was determined nation-wide that schools across America would be closed and we would be teaching virtually through the end of the school year, a plethora of concerns for my 5th grade students immediately entered my brain. Instantly, I became nervous, apprehensive, and highly worried about my student's success for the rest of the school year. I knew having online teaching experience at the college level and reading literature about online learning in my graduate courses would prepare me to a certain extent, but these children had never experienced this type of learning, ever. My students in college chose to take online courses, my 5th grade students were not given a choice. They left my room for spring break and didn't come back.

My main concern was would I be able to meet all my students' academic and emotional needs through a computer screen? Other questions flooded me; would I be able to complete the rest of my mandated curriculum and would I be able to still accommodate and ensure success of my ESE population? Ultimately, would some of my students merely survive or would they thrive throughout this huge shift in their learning?

The purpose of this reflection of online learning through the COVID-19 outbreak is to illustrate that when students are set up for success, there will be success even when it is in a whole new learning environment. I set up our new online learning environment much as I did my classroom environment with structure, consistency, and care. Students and parents learned quickly what needed to be done to ensure success. I learned just as fast that some students needed more support academically and emotionally just like in the classroom. Students and families had varying levels of comfort and experience with technology and this was evident. “Research has found that people with differing abilities use the Internet and technologies well below the rest of the population because they encounter many types of barriers.” (Mather & Sarkans, 2018, p. 63) Those students that merely survived in the classroom also survived in their new online learning setting, and those students that thrived in the classroom also thrived in their new online learning setting.

Surviving

As time went on this new learning environment proved to be an interesting learning curve for some of my students and families. This wasn't unexpected as people often resist change and it takes time to adjust to new situations. But just as in my classroom prior to the first day of school systems immediately were put into place to make this transition easier. I had an open communication from day one. “It might be a good start before an online course to decide the efficient communication and interaction ways during the course.” (Sarsar & Kisla, 2016, p. 57) Students and families had complete access to me, first, making phone calls to each parent in my class to ensure they had electronic devices and my phone number. I also guaranteed them that everything was going to be ok and their children would adjust to the new situation. I assured them that I had taught several University online courses and was well equipped to provide a supportive, safe, and engaging learning environment. “The use of multiple student-instructor communication channels may be highly related to student engagement. It is recommended that online instructors pay special attention to student-instructor interactions because they may affect learning outcomes” (Martin & Bolliger, 2018, p. 208). I had my worries, but I didn't want my students and families to be any more concerned than before. Kind, assuring and supportive words is what they needed to hear in this time of uncertainty and change. They needed to know that I would be there for them in this new environment just as I was in the classroom.

My main concern as a teacher was would I be able to meet all my students' academic and emotional needs through a computer screen? Over time I realized just as in the classroom the same applied in an online learning setting. Using a program called Sway I was able to create detailed weekly presentations, videos, readings, and assignments. Students and parents were given the Sway link Sunday evening, to front load what they were going to learn and what activities were going to be completed throughout the week. This is what was used throughout, so consistency was created from the onset. Students were highly encouraged to create a detailed schedule for themselves to ensure they would be able to complete what was expected of them. Students were also instructed to find a quiet place to work throughout the day away from any distracting factors. One of the first assignments given was for students to take a picture or video of their new work environments and describe it to the class. I posted an enthusiastic video of myself and my new workstation to motivate students to do the same. Creating a comfortable workspace was important to this new learning setting. Just as in the classroom some students thrived having the Sway link provided, schedules to follow, and the inspiration to find a new workspace. Others merely survived and didn't comply with my requests. Setting up new classroom norms was crucial for our new environment and just like in the classroom some students followed the new rules and procedures and some did not.

Academically, students got the support they needed as I supplied students with a plethora of engaging resources for the content that was being taught. "Student engagement increases student satisfaction, enhances student motivation to learn, reduces the sense of isolation, and improves student performance in online courses." (Martin & Bollinger, 2018, p. 205) I held daily Zooms from 8:30am-9:30am where students could ask questions regarding assignments and for students to interact. "To prevent online students from experiencing potential boredom and isolation in the learning environment, it is essential to build activities that enhance engagement. These activities assist students in feeling connected and can create a dynamic sense of community." (Martin and Bollinger (2018) p. 208) Sway was my platform for delivering instruction. This included detailed weekly expectations. Therefore, students were provided with the tools to academically still receive the education they should have even throughout a pandemic. My availability to my students was continued at a maximum level. Students had my Google voice phone number where they could text me or call me at any moment as well as my email address. I checked my email hourly as I knew there was always going to be several

messages in the in box. I looked forward to my daily 8am call from one of my ESE students that tried just as hard in the online learning setting as he did in the classroom. The same students that advocated for themselves academically face-to-face advocated for themselves online as well.

I also held my daily Zoom calls for my student's emotional well-being, which was a concern of mine due to the age of my students. "Although emotion in learning is a well-established topic in traditional classroom settings, it is a relatively new topic in online learning." (Sarsar & Kisla, 2016, p. 50) Students were highly upset that their 5th grade year was ending in such a manner. Students were no longer able to see their friends, play sports, and there was no longer a very anticipated end of the year field trip, and end of the year dance. Students needed some social activity; the Zoom calls were both academic and social in nature. Not only were they used for questions about academics, but they were also used to say hello, ask a friend how they were doing, or talk about a new video game. "Students often contact instructors about assignments, course materials, and grades; but to be more effective, online instruction should include opportunities for students to interact with one another and instructors pertaining to what makes their learning meaningful." (Martin & Bolliger, 2018, p. 2008) The school conducted a visual spirit week where students dressed up each day and had a little fun. During decade day a colleague and myself played 80's music and sang and danced to some of the classics from that era. Fostering a safe and fun environment for students was vital for this situation.

Students also completed weekly journal entries as an outlet for their feelings about what was going on. Students were told that this was an excellent chance to become a real primary source. Prompts such as the following was used; What is the #1 concern you have about what is going on right now? What is a small way in which your life has changed right now? What mattered to you a few days or a week ago that now seems irrelevant? Vice versa? These prompts were a way for students to discuss any real and raw feelings they had in this new environment. It was also another way to engage and stimulate students. "Student engagement in online learning is very important because online learners seem to have fewer opportunities to be engaged with the institution. Hence, it is essential to create multiple opportunities for student engagement in the online environment." (Martin & Bollinger, 2018, p. 206) Some students did an excellent job and were honest and truly wrote from the heart and some did not. This was another example of the survivors and thrivers within the online learning. Some students saw this as an opportunity to

thrive and other's saw it as another chance to not complete an assignment and survive in the environment, they are put in.

Another worrisome area was would I be able to complete the rest of my mandated curriculum and would my students learn the content and skills they needed to be successful in 6th grade? Prior to the 2019-2020 school in which I taught 5th grade I was a middle school teacher for 14 years. I knew that 5th grade was a vital year as 6th grade was a significant transitional year for students. I knew they needed specific skills to be successful in 6th grade. A fear was that I was losing out on 2 and 1/2 critical months of instruction that my students needed. The county I teach in gave teachers the autonomy of creating their own online learning environments. Teachers determined which standards they would focus on, how the standards would be taught, and which assignments would best compliment the standards. As opposed to neighboring counties where teachers were given a pre created course where teachers monitored students, graded work, and provided support as needed. I was given complete control over as what content and skills would be taught based on my curriculum guides and state standards just as in my face-to-face classroom. "Real-world application of projects that enhances subject mastery and critical thinking skills is one strategy related to fostering learner-to- content engagement." (Martin & Bollinger, 2018, p. 209) I was given the academic freedom to create learning activities that students would continue to critically think using power words such as analyze, evaluate, and summarize. Students were still able to exhibit creativity and had in depth discussions on what they were learning. "Well-designed interactive learning tasks tend to promote student interaction with instructors and peers and increase student involvement with course content." (Mather & Sarkans, 2018, p. 64). Assignments were also created to foster skills such as note taking, studying for standardized assessments, and writing across the content areas. I continued to have students keep themselves organized through online calendars and binders for their materials. Many students thrived given the opportunities to continue to engage in stimulating activities and assignments and some did not. There are other outside factors that could play a role in some students merely surviving in this new setting such as distracting siblings, little to no assistance at home and needing face-to-face encouragement and motivation from a teacher. However, several students that survived with exciting and engaging activities in the classroom were the same students surviving in online learning, but such factors are important enough to mention.

Thriving

My final dismay was would I be able to still accommodate and ensure success of my ESE students in this new learning environment? My ESE students were on 1st grade-3rd grade reading level and needed a wide range of accommodations within the classroom. They had made gains since the beginning of the year and my fear was that they would regress rather than progress. Fortunately, I had an amazing ESE resource teacher and students and parents that were highly motivated to thrive. It was an extreme learning curve for many of these students but with constant communication via text and email, home visits made by our ESE teacher, printed out packets, and several pep-talks the majority of my ESE students thrived through the COVID-19 online learning experience. These students thrived in a very non-conventional situation and I truly believe it was due to the support they continued to receive in their new situation.

After a few weeks, once structured systems were in place and students and parents became more comfortable with the programs I was using, as suspected there were students that thrived in their new learning environment and those that merely survived academically. My online classroom looked much like my face-to-face classroom. I used different modes to present information, but students seemed to act very similar in both situations. The same students that needed extra support within the four walls of my classroom also needed a lot of support within the online setting. “Many researchers have linked self-management in learning as a factor associated with student preparedness for online learning, unlike face-to-face courses where there are set meeting times, students participate in asynchronous online courses on their own time and this can be a challenge if they do not possess self-discipline.” (Martin, Stamper, & Flowers, 2020, pp. 42-43) This was the most challenging aspect of the whole experience. It was much harder to give those students extra support online because of the lack of access I had to them. In the classroom I could work one on one with them, motivate and praise them verbally, and constantly ensure they are completing work. Even if it was minimal. This was hard to do when they wouldn’t return texts, calls, or turn in assignments.

The survivors had a more difficult time surviving in an online setting. Comparatively, students that needed enrichment in brick and mortar also needed enrichment in the online setting. Similarly, eager to complete in the classroom and online and thrive to their fullest when given the opportunity. This was a situation that will not be forgotten and will now be discussed in

American educational courses across the nation as it has and will continue to affect teachers and students and the very face of American schools. Students need to be given structure, consistency, and care in any learning environment and they will be the deciding factors as to if they will thrive or merely survive.

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