

## Redefining Education during a Global Pandemic

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### Abstract

*During times of global uncertainty, the demand for innovative language learning and teaching across the globe must be stepped up and at the forefront of educational endeavors. The challenges and formidable impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic has stretched educational systems throughout the world to reassess their goals as students and educators are asked to teach and learn from home while distancing themselves from others. Online teaching experts offer advice on designing support for students and point out resources to assist in the transition to remote teaching [1]. Educational technology significantly contributes to accessible education and the opportunity to design support for students. This presentation/publication focuses on strategies and resources to reinvigorate knowledge and language learning acknowledging that online learning is tantamount to helping our students learn. Examples of research-based strategies are provided to strengthen lesson design, pedagogical input, and expand the knowledge of creative resources. By engaging students in innovative ways, they are able to incorporate essential content and learning is achieved. Creative examples are provided focusing on:*

- 1) *Connecting with all students*
- 2) *Addressing the challenges of remote learning*
- 3) *Web-based resources*
- 4) *Ways to keep students motivated and challenged to high ideals*

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### 1. Introduction

The uncertainty of a global pandemic that is constantly changing as we look for hope and answers impacts every citizen of our world. The numbers are skyrocketing and it is estimated that over 300 million students worldwide are experiencing an education disrupted by the spread of Coronavirus [2]. In China, 260 million children began taking their classes online after the Lunar New Year and this type of disruption bridging geographic teaching quality and wealth disparities has an impact that schools and universities will grapple with for a considerable period of time [3]. We must embrace new insights and take advantage of educational approaches offered in the online setting when schools close and face-to-face instruction is no longer an option so that students can explore and expand their acquisition of knowledge as we move courses online. The design and sequence of content and learning activities in both realms should be methodical, systematic and purposeful according to F. Darby [4]. As we commit to continuous improvement and redesign our lessons to meet the current needs of students, the opportunity is afforded to increase learning. This does not mean that students must feel isolated as if they are working in silos, and we can strengthen the curriculum by designing lessons that connect students online through discussions and groups activities. The concern that many of us must address relates to the students and schools that do not have the technology required to serve students. Some students do not have the resources to purchase the technology required for online learning. By engaging a community of learners in online teaching and learning that integrates content and language learning, students will be motivated to continue their learning in an online format as they deal with the challenges of a global pandemic.

### 2. Making connections with all students

Dedicated educators are committed to reaching out and connecting with students. Fortunately, during this technological age, we have the ability to pursue a variety of online tools and strategies to continue providing a quality educational experience for all students and pursue best practices in the virtual environment. There are numerous learning experiences, resources and strategies for education that can occur remotely. This will require innovation and resourcefulness on behalf of all of those who are challenged with providing, supporting and receiving an education in the home environment. Educators at the university level are employing a variety of online strategies and tools i.e. Blackboard Collaborate to

provide a virtual classroom environment that will challenge students and offer opportunities for group activities and discussion. They follow up with announcements and email to strengthen course learning activities and assignments. For example, university biology professors utilize textbooks that include online versions such as *Mastering Biology*, a teaching and learning platform that empowers them to reach students virtually (M. Caspary, personal communication, May 5, 2020).

In public schools in the United States, Zoom video communication platform is used with first grade students to support extended school closures. This enables them to meet virtually and keep up particularly with reading and mathematics programs. Another program called i-Ready, an online assessment and instruction program, is utilized that helps teachers provide all students a path to proficiency and growth in reading and mathematics [5]. This program is available in both English and Spanish to assist young learners. Teachers are also utilizing Google Meet to collaborate and reach students to share and read aloud. There is a concern for those students who may not have the online resources and capability to participate. In Clarke County, Georgia, these concerns are addressed by ensuring that students have access to internet providers and free hotspots to connect. The school website is active and distance learning links are available. To further address access issues, paper packets were designed for students and placed in bins so that they could be picked up by parents without exposure and within the confines of social distancing regulations. Furthermore, meal services were continued and opportunities for disadvantaged students to access the breakfast and lunch service that the schools were providing. (A. Pierson, personal communication, May 6, 2020). Particular concern has been expressed for English Language Learners (ELLs) who are faced with the challenges of learning English and simultaneously shifting to online instruction. Not only do these students, but also their parents need clear and specific guidelines regarding the information and opportunities to strengthen their English skills and fully participate in the educational experience. Often translation of written communication in a variety of languages is needed to guide students in accessing technology and participate in remote learning. There are systems in place that are designed to assist non-English speaking parents that will remain active when schools reopen [6].

### 3. Addressing the challenges of remote learning

Covid-19 has created a digital divide that has left millions at a disadvantage and the internet is assuming a critical role in communicating with our students [7]. Those students living in poverty are at an increased risk and often do not have the means to access the digital resources that other students take for granted. As unprecedented experiences abound in the realm of online education, many teachers are unprepared to transition their classes to meet with the expectations of the digital age. At Boise State University, procedures are in place and assistance is provided by the Division of Extended Studies to assist professors to leverage their expertise and transition their courses to an online format. In this way they can expand their boundaries and ensure that students are connected to the university and their academic endeavors. The university "Help Desk" is available to professors and students who need assistance or guidance tackling the challenges of online learning.

Students at the high school level described the challenges of virtual learning in a variety of ways. The school year ended early for these students and, because some students chose not to do their work online, grades were calculated based on the scores earned prior to school closures. One exception to this is the Advanced Placement Government class where the teacher has gone out of her way to ensure that students are well-prepared to take this high-stake exam. The format has changed to open book essay questions since students must take the exam from home. The teacher has provided notes and comprehensive information for students to learn and access during the exam including test preparation materials, court cases to learn, vocabulary and government amendments to study. (E. Poucher, personal communication, May 5, 2020). Students in another high school utilized "itslearning" which has prepared a Starter Kit to support schools and teachers to transition smoothly to remote learning. These solutions have been compiled from best practices from schools that have already implemented online learning. (A. Caspary, personal communication, May 5, 2020). Both of these students interviewed explained that they are also meeting the challenges of remote learning by taking Driver's Education courses online and practicing driving with their parents.



#### 4. Web-based resources

Depending on the grade and ability level, numerous web resources are contributing to the remote educational experiences that are facing us during this pandemic. The most common platforms that were mentioned were Google Meetings, Zoom, and Blackboard. During an interview with a sixth grade (age 11) student attending a private academy, the lessons were well-organized focusing on specific class meetings daily accompanied by homework assignments, video calls, group work and discussions. Teachers posted specific assignments in Google Classroom, a free service for schools, students and parents. Chromebook powered by Google was utilized and links to various web sites, videos and follow up questions were the expectation (S. Poucher, personal communication, May 4, 2020). Students in the private academy still had meeting times arranged for art and music. A favorite is the TED-Ed project — TED's education initiative — makes short video lessons worth sharing, aimed at educators and students. Within TED-Ed's growing library of lessons, are carefully curated educational videos, many of which are collaborations between educators and animators nominated through the TED-Ed platform [8]. Throughout the series of interviews with educators and students, it became evident that the student at the private academy was expected to do far more comprehensive work than those students in the public school setting.

#### 5. Ways to keep students motivated and challenged to high ideals

Dedicated educators are sincerely making every effort to engage and challenge their students. They genuinely want to stay connected being available and responsive to the needs of their students encouraging and supporting them as education is making a rapid transformation to never imagined lengths. Student learning at home within the confines of social distancing is a new experience for all of us and the Covid-19 pandemic has sent us reeling to be connected, flexible and collaborative in the face of adversity. In an interview with a student in the fourth grade (age 10), he explained that his teacher made an effort to call on the phone and email him personally. She sent links to engaging material and games such as Wizard Prodigy math game. He explained that websites let you see your score and his teacher lets him know his progress. However, a concern is that the work being assigned is too easy and the advanced students are not receiving the extra work that they prefer. Only English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics are being covered online and other courses are not addressed (E. Caspary, personal communication, May 5, 2020). Experienced educators in Hong Kong and Italy who faced the challenges of this epidemic before it strongly impacted the United States suggested that reduced assignments were beneficial and urged everyone to be flexible and optimistic [9]. As the challenges continue to mount, expert educators are rising to the occasion by employing innovative strategies expanded to connect their students as they make a concerted effort to provide quality activities, resources and educational experiences designed to positively impact their students.

#### 6. Conclusions and recommendations

The fast-changing educational environment of the Covid-19 global pandemic is an unprecedented experience for educators and students. The opportunity to address the myriad challenges that we are faced with and provide a quality education for all students incorporating technology and innovative strategies for online learning in order to meet the multifaceted needs of our students requires us to revolutionize the learning experience and carefully address the numerous dimensions yielded by these profound changes. As we face the numerous dimensions of this pandemic and its impact on all levels of education, we must rise to the challenge and incorporate technology in various forms coupled with the human factors that affect student growth and achievement.

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