



Rapid Shifts Require Rapid Response: Taking Action as the World's Schools Shut Down

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Abstract

As the beginning weeks of 'lockdown' unfolded in Italy, my concern was for families facing endless hours trying to keep their children busy. After all, most parents are not trained teachers and most family members do not usually spend so much time together. The horror of COVID-19 in Italy tore at my heart – as an educator of Italian descent. My husband and I, who teach at the university level, had previously conducted research in Italian schools in Rome, Valle D'Aosta, Marano sul Panaro, and have been engaged with the Contrada della Selva (Siena) for several years. We thought of these families, teachers, and children, with whom we had built personal and professional relationships. How would parents cope with being home from their jobs, having their children with them, while facing their own fears and concerns for their loved ones, work, and the logistics of this rapid shift in their lives? I brainstormed strategies to create a daily blog to electronically reach communities in Italy, a resource of read alouds and craft activities for families to do together, or just by children. However, COVID-19 crossed the ocean and within hours, our own city and university shut down. While my initial target audience changed, postings could also help any community. This session addresses how an idea to help those impacted by quarantine emerged into an international effort for families across the globe. One of the biggest obstacles, however, has been getting the word out to share the resources with those who could benefit most.

Keywords: COVID-19, literacy, learning activities, educational resources.

1. Introduction

As an educator of Italian descent, I watched the news as COVID-19 ravaged Italy. During the beginning weeks of 'stay at home' unfolding there, I wondered about the families facing endless hours together. Even considering the rapid transition to lessons being presented on line, the majority of each day in home isolation would not be spent doing schoolwork. How would parents keep their children busy for the rest of the day and evening?

My husband and I teach at the university level and have previously conducted research in Italian schools (Rome, Valle D'Aosta, Marano sul Panaro) and have been engaged with Contrada della Selva (Siena) for several years. I thought of the families, teachers, and children with whom we had built personal and professional relationships. How could I help from almost 5,000 miles away? I brainstormed ideas and decided to create a Blog of simple recreational activities they could easily access.

As I planned the next moves, our own university closed, as did our local schools. Within two days, the entire state of Georgia (and most of the USA) closed for all but essential workers. My plan for Italy quickly changed to include our local communities. The blog could be accessed by anyone who knew about it. This story is not unusual in a time of crisis, but one of thousands of ways people across the globe have tried to help one another.

1.2 The Original Plan

I created a daily blog (*The Reading Rhinoceros Resources*) to electronically reach our colleagues in Italy. The plan was to invite friends there to share with their friends, schools, and anyone who might be interested in children's literature and related activities. For read aloud videos of simple American children's books, I would show the text, so Italians, who are learning English, could hear and see the words and illustrations to help comprehension. I crafted activities related to the books, for families to do together or just by children. I recruited my husband, an artist, to create simple step-by-step drawing videos to coordinate with poems, crafts, songs, and games, that children could follow. I began the technology part, using *Blogger*, a blog-publishing service I have used in the past [1].



2. Rapid Shifts

The location of our university serves two surrounding school districts: Lowndes County and Valdosta City Schools. These, as well as school districts across the state, were impacted by the following announcement: “On Thursday, March 12...Governor Brian Kemp [Georgia, USA] addressed the state’s growing concerns [about COVID-19] by allowing school districts to close for up to 14 days. After careful thought and consideration, Lowndes County Schools has decided to close our school district effective Monday, March 16 through at least Friday, March 27. Our school district remains hyper-focused on your health and safety and will continue monitoring and sharing information about the developing situation with COVID-19. Should there be a need to extend the closure we will communicate that message with our community.” [2]

“While Valdosta City Schools is closed during the coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19, we are unable to offer online learning options and/or direct educational services to the general student population. At this time we cannot ensure all students and staff will have equal or equitable access to home Internet connection, an online learning system, and/or devices to access full online learning options. In addition, unfortunately, our district does not have an online learning system to effectively provide instruction and one-on-one support for students with disabilities. Please continue to encourage students to stay engaged in learning during the school closure. Students can read every day and access VCS Home Learning Resources. Free educational resources, updates, and suggestions for home learning are posted below.” [3]

The next day, March 13, 2020, President Donald Trump’s declaration of a national emergency resulted in the US Department of Defense to recommend the closing of all school buildings for the remainder of the academic year [4]. This in essence, would keep more than 55 million school-aged children (Pre-K through grade 12) at home in the United States [5].

2.1 Required: Rapid Response

A quote by noted psychologist, Angela Duckworth, came to mind: “Perseverance is essential to achieving our goals, but passion is paramount to identifying goals in the first place.” [6]. I had the passion, but as we suddenly had to move our own coursework to an online format, could the perseverance be maintained? Walker (2020) reports the closing of schools impacted teachers who wanted to get it right, many of whom had never taught on line before, were new to technology used by their school districts, and instantly, not only found themselves dealing with their own families and concerns for safety, but had to provide emotional and social support for their students [7] [8].

2.2 Taking Action as the World’s Schools Shut Down

The whole world was trying to find ways to engage students remotely [8]. Although this blog was more recreational, I realized that there was a huge disparity, not only in our county, but throughout the US regarding access to the internet and availability of devices. When I was creating for our Italian audience, I was pretty sure everyone would have access. Here, the divide was huge [9] [10].

When I created activities, I tried to imagine materials families might already have available: empty boxes, markers and crayons, even toilet paper rolls. Directions for activities were simple with photos and videos where possible. My goal was to post something every day that could be completed at any time, (except a few related to Mother’s Day and spring). This, I thought, provided optimum opportunities for audience engagement.

2.3 Blogging: Frequency, Variety, and Simplicity

Initially, as the university suspended classes, it was necessary to provide resources my pre-service teachers could utilize to complete existing and revised course assignments. This is where the “resources” part was added. For example, there was an upcoming reading log, but bookstores and libraries were closed. I compiled a list of book resource sites (like *Vooks* [11]) to provide access for anyone using the blog, while meeting the needs of my students.

Activities included virtual field trips, author homepages, videos about art, science, math, geography, art, music, and movement, crafts, and of course, literacy. Since April is Poetry Month, a children’s poem became easy daily posts.

2.4 Sharing: Getting the Word Out

The first group to access the blog was my pre-service teachers. I provided resources they would need. I asked them to click FOLLOW, to enable receiving updates as I made them. Then I asked them to share the blog with their mentor teachers, practicum students, teacher friends, and anyone they knew with young children.



Due to IRB regulations, I was not able to use my university students' work as blog entries. I sent emails and Facebook messages to as many former students and teacher friends, asking them to share, as well (<https://ReadingRhinoceros.blogspot.com>). I solicited friends to create activities that I could post, giving them credit, as well. But teachers were also facing overnight changes to preparing lessons on line, while caring for their own families. I shared every opportunity I had. But the response was still very low.

3. Conclusions

The blog posts are always available. As an educator, I am very aware of the "summer learning loss" and the idea of this project was to provide engaging activities to keep children thinking creatively. Perhaps having this resource, might lessen the summer slump [12].

The hardest part was keeping ahead, to be sure there was a posting for every day. *Blogger* gives the option to set publication for a specific date, so when I caught up with my own schoolwork, I created posts, ready to go "live" on a given day. At times, keeping up was difficult, but I am into a routine now and hope to keep posting entries throughout the summer.

My Italian speaking and writing skills are not strong enough to have created in Italian. I relied on a professor friend to edit my *Introduction for Italian Families* before I posted it. A speech pathologist friend in Siena was willing to secure the contrada's permission to share and provided the link to the group. My attempts to explain to two other Italian mayors met with appreciation, but I am unsure of the actual usage by these Italian communities.

A creative team would have been very helpful, especially in the early days of getting the blog up and running. I will appeal again to my teacher friends and former students to create a few postings, for which I will recognize their service in a letter or certificate. Their contributions would definitely help build this resource. My plan is to reach out to my contacts once again, asking to share the blog.

A personal thanks to my husband, my #1 supporter and to the friends who have contributed posts. We all need to thank our teachers. Is it ironic that Teacher Appreciation week occurred during the pandemic? I think families and the general public have a new (and long overdue) respect for what teachers do. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2020/05/04/teacher-appreciation-week-2020-coronavirus-virtual/3066238001/>. [13]

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The Blog, *The Reading Rhinoceros Resources*, is available at: <https://readingrhinoceros.blogspot.com>