

COVIDucation: Flexibility in Pandemic Education

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Abstract

In mid-March of 2020, the United States realized the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic was real and was affecting our world in ways not seen for 100 years. From its tattered beginnings to now, teachers have answered the call and have remained vigilant and flexible regarding their professional practices, pedagogy, and overall sense of what it truly means to be a 21st-century teacher. In this article, I describe how three teachers decided the best way to produce an equitable education for our students and to maintain our own well-being was to collaborate flexibly with each other. We worked together and developed a system that allowed us to create interesting and high-level science experiences during times that were stressful and fearful for most people. I believe our abilities to cooperate, be flexible, and adapt for the good of each other and our students gave our students the opportunities they needed to be successful in our science classes. Teachers have always had to be flexible, but the pandemic pushed our abilities to new levels. I hope this article gives other educators a sense that, by flexibly working together, we can accomplish almost anything.

Keywords: flexibility, collaboration, teamwork, teaching and learning in a pandemic

COVIDUCATION: FLEXIBILITY IN PANDEMIC EDUCATION

Flexibility is a way of being or a quality limited to some but not all. Based on an underlying composition, some things can crack under immense amounts of pressure, and others are brittle and fall apart with the slightest bit of effort. Others maintain a high level of rigidity and refuse to give up their shape and composition, and some are so loose and free that they never give a thought to a particular form or structure.

In mid-March of 2020, public schools in the United States came to an abrupt halt due to the outbreak of COVID-19, a scenario that has not happened in over 100 years since the outbreak of the Spanish Flu/Influenza. From its tattered beginnings to now, teachers have answered the call and have remained vigilant and flexible regarding their professional practices, pedagogy, and overall sense of what it truly means to be a 21st-century teacher.

Flexibility, the capability to adapt to new, different, or changing requirements, has been a key weapon in a teacher's arsenal since the day they were all sent home until their return to a "new normal." Now either remote, hybrid, or 100% in-person, I believe teachers are hyper aware of just how flexible they need to be to provide an educational experience that is equitable and appropriate for all of their students in these dire times of the pandemic.

"I'm a schoolteacher . . . When I tell people what I do for a living, they think, well, that figures. But over here . . . it's a big, big mystery" (Saving Private Ryan, 1998)

In Steven Spielberg's box-office World War II epic, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), Tom Hanks portrayed John Miller, a war-hardened captain of the Second Rangers who stormed the Dog Green sector of Omaha Beach in the first wave of Operation Overlord, lost countless men along the way due to his decisions, and made it through insurmountable events with the main

task of finding and preserving the life of one elusive private of the 101st Airborne Division. However, with all the devastation occurring around him, the hopelessness of his squad, and the internal struggle of what his place was during this mysterious time of his life, Miller was reminded by one thing throughout the pandemonium: He was simply a humble teacher thrust into an arena of chaos, trying his best to survive.

For me, as a middle school science teacher who taught fully remote for the latter part of the 2020 school year and taught fully in person from Day 1 during the 2020-2021 school year, with maxed-out classrooms during the height of the pandemic, I reflect on where I have been, what I have done, what I have learned, where I am going, and what I will become as an educator after being thrust into the arena of chaos brought on by the COVID-19 global pandemic. I have been tested, triumphant, defeated, and reshaped into a “hardened teacher”; however, I am moldable, adaptable, and, above all, flexible.

Flexibility can be described as a capability to adapt to new, different, or changing requirements. As teachers, we were tasked with saving the sacred institution of teaching and learning during a global pandemic, and the ability to be flexible was paramount to the institution’s overall survival. As the school years go on and the fight for education endures, flexibility among districts, administrators, and teachers must be present to make it out alive.

“I’ll get a large coffee with cream only please,” I utter as my fiancé finds us a seat at a local bakery. It is Sunday, March 15, 2020, and we are the only people in the barren café, about to enjoy our Sunday ritual. The desolation inside and outside is puzzling to us, as Sundays are usually booming here, but, in the back of our heads, we know the reason why. The pandemic is just beginning, schools and businesses are starting to close, and a whole new frontier of survival, as we know it, is about to begin. That’s when I got the email . . .

Fast forward 2 days ahead to March 17, and I was now a teacher thrown into chaos and pandemonium. It was a confusing, daunting, and tiring time. Asked to come into school to make the shift to remote learning for 2 weeks, I was surrounded by brave teachers on a mission.

“Ok, where are we at in our curriculum?” one teacher asks. We are a team of three science teachers using a brand new, scripted primary resource.

“I’m on Chapter 2 of the chemical reactions unit, where are you at?” I responded.

“Ok, perfect, I’m right in line with you. Where are you at?” we ask the third member of our crew.

“Oh no . . . I’m nowhere near caught up with you guys . . . I’m still on the phase change unit from a month ago . . . this is not good,” replies the other science teacher in our crew. She was disappointed in herself and felt she had let us down. Unison in lesson delivery had been a key pillar to this new science program to deliver an equitable experience, and she was remorseful. “I’m really sorry guys . . . what the hell are we going to do?!”

“Hey, it’s ok,” I replied. “None of us could have predicted this mess we’re in right now. I think we’re just going to have to bend the rules a little bit here and be as flexible as possible with the scenario that’s been dumped into our lap.”

We all shake our heads in agreement and begin to push forward.

None of us could have predicted 2 weeks of remote teaching and learning would turn into almost 4 months of content delivery and knowledge acquisition. The odds were stacked against us; however, never underestimate the ability of good teachers. Some districts were given the entire week of March 16–20, 2020, to prepare lessons and technology for delivery on the following Monday, March 23. In my district, we were given the task to get the job done appropriately and efficiently, with students “in school” by Wednesday, March 18th. Naturally,

we succeeded in this monumental task of converting public education into online learning, a task that had never been accomplished in the history of public education. It only took us 2 days to meet our goal.

Accomplishing this 2-day task was not easy and came with many sacrifices, all in the realm of flexibility. As mentioned, the odds were stacked against us, 2:1, when it came to what content was being delivered, and unison was key in making an equitable experience for all three science teams in seventh grade. The new science curriculum we were given at the beginning of the 2020 school year was a bit rigid and inflexible, as the lessons and activities had been designed by an outside entity, and they had to be completed within a certain timeline.

Curricular needs must have a flexible approach to match the adaptive and rapidly changing world around us. Our team believes, when teachers are provided a more flexible approach to curriculum, they can be more innovative and can implement change easily to meet the needs of the classroom they serve. Instead of working for the curriculum at this point, it was time to be flexible and have the curriculum work for us.

To make the beginning of remote learning easy for us, the two of us who were already ahead in the curriculum made the very easy and flexible decision to drop the unit we were halfway through. In compliance, the teacher who was a whole unit behind us dropped the unit she was teaching. The flexible decision to drop the two different units and start fresh with our students was paramount and served as a solid foundation for the beginning of remote learning. By the time students were ready to learn on Zoom, we had moved onto a brand-new unit on the academic calendar, a unit we would address in April, according to our academic calendar. With only 2 weeks of remote learning, we figured we would address the content we had to drop abruptly by the end of the school year.

“I’m exhausted, how about you guys?” I remarked, as my eyes glazed over from staring at the computer screen all day. It was around 1 p.m. on a warm May morning. I peered out the window at the hot pavement and saw the leaves were beginning to blossom on the ginkgo tree outside.

“Exhausted doesn’t even begin to describe how I feel right now,” sighed one of the other science teachers.

“I think the part that is beating me up the most is trying to fit everything from this new scripted resource into a 30-minute Zoom meeting! These lessons are designed for 45 minutes, and, even when we were teaching in person, I still couldn’t even fit everything into that slotted amount of time! I think that’s why I got so behind last time, and I feel like it’s going to happen again!” exclaimed one of the teachers.

“I wouldn’t worry about that now, it’s in the past. However, I’ve been thinking, and I have a really good idea that could make the rest of this school year a little bit easier and flexible for all of us.”

Our remote teaching campaign stretched on longer than 2 weeks and turned into the rest of the school year, as many of us predicted it would. As I began to type this on a snowy Saturday morning in February of 2021, the battle of remote teaching was still going on (and still is!) for most schools and districts across New Hampshire, the United States, and the world. The experience of teaching multiple students, nearly 100 middle schoolers in my caseload every day, in the ether of the internet, is a unique experience. We were driving ourselves to the brink, spending countless hours designing engaging activities that could be enjoyed at home, creating presentations, and adapting a square curriculum that needed to fit into a circular timeslot. We

realized our approach needed to change in this environment, or we would snap. Being flexible with one another was the key.

As three seventh-grade science teachers, we recognized we were all doing way too much. By bending and being flexible to each other's needs, we soon realized we could do one third of the work we were already doing and still get the job done of providing an equitable experience for not only the students we individually taught but also the whole seventh grade. For the rest of the year, we decided one person would be assigned to create a week's worth of science lessons. We would rotate this process over a 3-week rotation, as there were three of us. This made for a busy week of creating lessons for all three teachers to use if it was your turn; however, it did alleviate the pressure for the next 2 weeks, as the planning was very minimal and allowed us to focus on our pedagogy in this digital format. In this case, flexibility acted as a catalyst to make an educational experience that was equitable for all involved and was a means to choose what was best needed to meet the needs of students, the "classroom," and ourselves.

We continued this 3-week looping rotation for the remainder of the school year, bending and flexing to each other to make the experience of remote teaching easier for us. It was daunting and tiring at moments, but it also provided an outlet to be creative and flexible with the curriculum, technology, and tools at our disposal. In return, it also provided students with an equitable learning experience, as we were all in step with one another, providing the same lessons to students on a day-to-day basis.

Lessons Learned With Flexible Curriculum

Even pre-COVID, flexibility concerning curriculum was a hot topic in education. With heightened methods of standardization and rigidity with curriculum, studies have sought to find the benefit and impact of what flexibility permits. One thing is for certain: Current curricular

needs must have a flexible approach to match the adaptive and rapidly changing world around us (Jonker et al., 2020). When teachers are provided a more flexible approach when it comes to curriculum, they are found to be more innovative and can implement change easily to meet the needs of the classroom they serve (Jonker et al., 2020).

Flexibility pertaining to specific content areas (e.g., math and literacy) also has valuable outcomes. When teachers and students alike demonstrate stronger levels of flexibility regarding texts addressed with their classroom, heightened levels of play, talk, and communication are present (Hassett, 2008). With heightened levels of play, talk, and communication between teachers and students, flexibility acts as a means to approach education that is equitable for all involved and to choose what is best needed to meet the needs of the classroom (Hassett, 2008).

Go forth and be flexible in your behaviors, practice, pedagogy, and everything that encompasses the “new normal” of teaching during this unique time of pandemic and postpandemic education.

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