

## Teaching Remotely

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### Abstract

For the last 2 years, throughout the world, we have been dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Every aspect of our lives has been affected, and teachers have been asked to help maintain a semblance of normality for our students and their families. Last year was the most difficult year of my professional life, and I was not alone in that experience. In this article, I share some of my experiences and thoughts through this process. I am a reading specialist, and, before that, I was a kindergarten teacher. During the pandemic, I was asked to teach Grade 2 students online. I was nervous about the sudden change to a new grade level and a new job description because I care about being a good teacher, a good teammate, and a professional educator. I wanted my new students to get the education they deserved, so I set out to learn the curriculum and the technology needed to become an effective online Grade 2 teacher. Teachers all around the world were asked to change, almost overnight, what and how they teach; I survived, and my students survived. Unfortunately, along the way, many of us lost loved ones to the pandemic. My experiences gave me five lessons about the future: (a) Do not take what I have for granted, (b) Relationships are vital for students and teachers, (c) Flexibility is an important quality for teaching, (d) Be more prepared for the next emergency, and (e) Take care of myself. I hope this article gives you, the reader, hope for the future.

*Keywords:* online teaching, teaching during COVID-19, remote learning, dealing with stress

## TEACHING REMOTELY

The 2019–2020 school year started out like any other school year. The kids and the staff were excited to begin a new year. Early in September and October, I started to hear about the COVID-19 virus on the news, but I never imagined it would have such a profound effect. It is ironic that everything about the school year started off in a very familiar fashion but ended in such uncertainty and anxiety. Most of the uncertainty and anxiety had nothing to do with “school.” Teachers know and are used to every year being different, and the challenges of teaching vary from year to year. However, on March 11, 2020, COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic, and, by Friday, March 13, 2020, our school district was preparing bags of student materials to send home with our students so they could do work from home. I never imagined we would not return to school for the remainder of the year. I do not think I will ever start my day without truly being grateful for all I have.

On Monday, March 16, 2020, I fired up my computer and signed into Zoom. I did not really know what I was doing and quickly watched a few YouTube videos on how to set up Zoom. I then called each one of my kindergarten students and talked to their parents about what time I would be meeting with their child and the length of time they would be online with me. I quickly discovered my students’ parents also did not know how to get on Zoom. So, I walked each parent through the process and got on Zoom with them while talking on the phone. It took all week for me to reach all parents and go through this process one by one.

In the beginning, I spent an enormous amount of time determining how to present materials and making PowerPoint slides to go with the reading lessons I was teaching. I had to adapt the materials I was using in school to online materials 5-year-old students found attention worthy. Their attention span in school is normally very short; however, their attention span

online was a lot lower. It was quite challenging to keep their attention, and it was very frustrating when I had their attention and then the internet froze. It was at times quite comical as well. When my students got tired of what we were doing, they would just get up and leave. The months from March to June were difficult. I did not feel I was making a difference. I did not realize that, come fall, it would be the most difficult and challenging year of my entire professional life. March to June 2020 was just a tiny wrinkle in the whole scheme of things.

### **Remote Teaching**

During the summer of 2020, I was asked to teach second grade remotely. First, it had been 4 years since I had taught in the classroom, and a lot had changed in that time. Second, I left a kindergarten position. I did not know much about teaching second grade. I felt like a 1st-year teacher. I was nervous and anxious about what I did not know. You do not know what you do not know, and that is a very scary thought. As a veteran teacher, I could now see that. When I started teaching, I was anxious about fitting in and doing a great job so others would like me. As a veteran teacher, I understood more fully that the stakes were much higher. The proof is in student performance on standardized tests. So, I wondered and worried about whether the instruction was highly effective so student learning and academic growth would be evident. I also understood my students' emotional well-being was critical to learning. I could see a huge responsibility in front of me. My students were at home, and they did not have their classmates sitting next to them. How could I, as their teacher, create a classroom environment that mimicked a "typical" school day? How could I balance academics and give them what they really needed, which was a sense of security and familiarity? I felt the pressure of delivering a rich and engaging curriculum and the need to ensure my students had a sense of belonging and connection to their classmates and to me. How was I going to do that when everyone was on a

screen? These were all questions that swirled around in my head each day and kept me up late at night.

I thanked God each day as I was placed at a very good school in our district. It is a small school, including one teacher per grade, support staff, and the usual people who make up a school. They were all so awesome. They are exemplars of human beings. Everyone genuinely works together. My principal is very knowledgeable and supportive of her staff. In addition, my district did a great job with having our curriculum in a digital format. That was my silver lining. I am thankful I did not have to worry about not having adequate materials with which to work. My worry was about learning how to use all the online components quickly and efficiently.

I also stressed over my students' well-being and how I was going to ensure they felt a sense of belonging, because the isolation and being away from their friends was very much on their minds. They expressed sadness at not seeing, talking to, and playing with their friends in person. It was a tremendous weight and worry for me. The second most frustrating part of my job, as well as for parents, was the internet issues that arose almost daily in some form or another. I do not know how many times I lost my internet connection while I was home. The internet was better when I worked from school. Even though all students were provided with Chromebooks, quite a few of my students did not have internet. It was a very hard time for families. Their stress was about having to share teaching responsibilities with me and not knowing what to do and how to do it. Parents also had to deal with the fact that kids are not always receptive to parents taking on the role of their teacher. Children just want mom and dad to be mom and dad. Many parents were also juggling work responsibilities. It was a balancing act all of us were not used to. Many parents had to be online at work at the same time their child was online at school, so they could not support their child's learning as closely as they wanted to.

There were many days, weeks, and even months that I did not see a few of my second graders. They did not get online. Several of them did not come to school. I did not get to meet them. They lost an entire school year.

### **Personal Challenges**

March of 2020 did not start out badly; however, once everyone was mandated to stay home, things quickly went south. I had watched the number of COVID deaths in the United States and around the world rising, and I am sure many of my colleagues had the same observations. I never imagined it would hit home so quickly. I lost an uncle, two aunts, and a cousin to COVID. Although I had not been in close contact with them in recent years, it was hard to wrap my brain around the fact that they all passed from COVID within a few weeks of each other. They did not have the chance to get the vaccine, as it was not available at that time. It seemed that, each week, I knew someone who had contracted COVID and then passed from it.

In October of 2020, I had to take my husband to the emergency room because he woke up in extreme pain. When we got to the hospital, they would not let me go in. He could not talk to them, so I had to call and talk to the attending nurse about his medical history. I waited in the parking lot several hours before I could get anyone to talk to me. I did not know what was going on or how he was. I was so stressed out and extremely worried. In those hours, I understood a tiny bit of what families with loved ones in the hospital were going through. Not being with your loved one is difficult. I could not imagine how he felt as well. I do not know how many times I called to check on him, and they would say someone would call me back, but they did not call. Hours later, my husband called from his cell phone to ask where I was. Then he walked out of the hospital and into my car. He asked them why no one had called me, and they said they were so busy. He was not in a life-or-death situation, so it was not their top priority. I tried to put it in

perspective, and, as I reflect, I can understand the magnitude of what they were dealing with was certainly greater than what my husband went through. In those few hours, I came to understand the fear, frustration, and extreme heartbreak of people who were not allowed to visit their loved ones while they lay dying. It was a very long and stressful day, yet, in the scheme of things, others had it worse.

### **Lessons Learned**

Having gone through the most difficult year of my career has taught me five very important lessons: (a) Do not take what I have for granted, (b) Relationships are vital for students and teachers, (c) Flexibility is an important quality for teaching, (d) Be more prepared for the next emergency, and (e) Take care of myself. Each of these lessons helped me to make it through the most difficult days, and these lessons have helped me to be a strong person, both professionally and personally.

First, when I wake up each day now, I am grateful for all I have. No longer do I take my loved ones for granted. No longer do I take my school and my colleagues for granted. No longer do I take my students for granted. Every day now I try to remember to be grateful for the people in my life and for the honor I have of being a teacher. I hug my loved ones a little more often, harder, and longer. I now see my colleagues in a brighter way, and I notice their goodness and their skills as teachers and as people. My students are even more important to me now. Each day I try to remember to tell them how special they are, and how lucky I am to be their teacher.

Second, I am more aware that every student must have a positive and productive relationship with me, their teacher, and with their peers. Each day, I make sure to have a positive conversation with each of my students. We talk more about how we are a family in our class and must support each other every day. In school, I try harder to notice my colleagues, and, when I

see someone having a rough day, I try to encourage them. Now, I am much more able and willing to let the little things go. In our interactions, I try hard not to be judgmental of people, and I am more open to seeing differences as gifts instead of a hindrance.

Third, as a teacher, I have always tried to be organized, maybe even over-organized. Through the years, I have always been concerned that my students will do well on their standard assessments. Today, I still want to be organized, and I still want my students to assess well, but it is just as important that my students and colleagues are well emotionally and physically. That allows me to be more flexible in my work. I am more willing to change the lesson of the day when I see that my kids need more attention or are stressed. Their social and emotional needs are more important to me now, and if it means their test scores are slightly lower, then so be it. My students must be strong within themselves, and I now notice more and try to help them to be stronger.

Fourth, there will be another emergency that will force society to adjust how we live. There will be storms, health crises, economic crises, political crises, and other emergencies that affect how we teach. I realize I must be more prepared for the next crisis. I will use technology more in my normal teaching. I will develop options for students who are ill and must miss school for a time. I am now more prepared to deal with snow or loss of electricity days. As I develop teaching units, I am more mindful of being prepared for Plan B. In addition to learning more about reading and language in my professional development, I am determined to continue to learn about using technology in my teaching. When the next emergency hits our schools, I am and will continue to be more prepared to deal with the new normal for that emergency.

Finally, I have learned that each of us must take care of ourselves. We must be strong emotionally and physically to deal effectively with the stresses of society, our families, and our

jobs. We cannot ignore ourselves because, if we do, then we will not be strong enough to help each other, our students, and their families—or our own families. I do my best work with and for my students when I am strong. The same is true for my family, friends, and colleagues.

I have faced the most difficult year of my professional life; I survived, and I helped my students survive. The lessons I learned during this process have made me a much stronger teacher and person. We are not finished with this pandemic yet, but I am convinced we will all be stronger as we move through the next phase and then the next emergency. I am a teacher, and that is what teachers do.

COVID-19 has made its mark on the world. It has changed all our lives forever in some way; however, I like to believe that it personally afforded me insight on how truly critical our connections are to people and that I must always strive and prioritize the well-being of my students first before I worry about test results. I also know friendships and family are everything. My prayer each day is to make teaching decisions based on what my students need to be ready to learn, and I hope my actions and words tell my family and friends I love and cherish them.