THE [NEW] RULES OF ENGAGEMENT:

Keeping Students on Track in a Virtual World

By Ellen Ullman

"It's all about the relationships," says R. J. DeLisle, director of technology for the Baldwinsville Central School District. "If students had a positive relationship with their teachers before we went virtual, they're going to crave that connection and engage in whatever way they can."

One of the ways Baldwinsville teachers have bonded with students during quarantine is through video. Teachers are recording and posting lessons on YouTube, and students have responded with videos of their own. "A group of high schoolers recorded a communal song; one student plays an instrument for the first part and then another student continues the song on a different instrument," says DeLisle.

The high school principal and the assistant principal did a time-lapse video of them painting a mural in the school that read "Seniors: we miss you." Many of the music teachers gave video lessons — not too surprising for a district that's been named a best community for music education designee for ten consecutive years.

Online classes are another way teachers keep students involved. DeLisle, whose wife is a first-grade teacher, witnessed this when he watched his wife using Zoom and Google Meet with her students. "They loved when she showed them our dog and loved being able to share their pets with her and the class," he says.

Perhaps nobody engages students with video more than Thomas J. Coughlin, principal of Elden Elementary. Every day, he put on a different costume to videotape a morning message. "He has dressed up as a cowboy, the Riddler, Batman, and a pirate. The students love it so much that he might have to continue doing it when schools reopen next fall," laughs DeLisle.

Although plenty of students used video and social media before the pandemic, DeLisle, who was named SAANYS 2020 Leader in Digital Education, finds significance in the fact that they are now using it for something more than socializing. They are creating videos to express themselves in a different way, to communicate with their teachers, and to stay connected.

Focusing on connections engaged students at other schools, too. "Our teachers gave out their phone numbers and did whatever they could to check on their students' social-emotional well-being," says Kisten M. Giglio, principal at Norwich High School.

In addition, Norwich teachers hosted virtual drop-in lunches and virtual healing circles. "A healing circle is a restorative practice that we used to do in person; it's another way to check in and give students a chance to talk," says Giglio. Some of her art teachers sent craft supplies to students so that they could make friendship bracelets and other items. The school also features senior spotlights on the website each day.

Giglio says making certain that students are okay is more important than formal instruction. "Our counselors, social workers, and at-risk coordinator have made more than 1,200 contacts with students. Because of our overall human approach, teachers are reporting student participation rates of 80 to 90 percent."

Maintaining strong personal connections through video and other methods is only one way to keep students on track. For other districts, innovation proved successful.

"We were the first district in New York State to close," says Jerry Crisci, director of instructional technology and innovation and codirector of the Center for Innovation for Scarsdale Public Schools. "One of our staff members was part of the coronavirus cluster in New Rochelle and tested positive."

Scarsdale's education plan is built around STEAM, hands-on learning, and the whole child approach, none of which replicate easily in an online environment. Crisci, who was already connected with educators around the world, was thankful to have been communicating with educators in Italy. Since the country was a month ahead of the U.S. in terms of school closures, administrators on his listserv were already sharing continuity plans and recommending digital tools for e-learning.

As Crisci says, "We couldn't replicate school or pivot. We had to reimagine what school could be." He saw other districts using Pear Deck, Screencastify, and Google tools and was able to purchase those products and start helping teachers learn how to use them.

He wanted teachers to try and keep the traditional activities that students look forward to, so everyone worked to adjust expectations and delivery. High school teachers held a virtual talent show and a virtual science symposium. Elementary teachers put together virtual author visits.

The largest engagement came during spring break, however. The governor mandated that schools remain in session, but the district wanted to give teachers and students a bit of a break since they'd been virtual for a few weeks already. Ray Pappalardi, director of physical education, health, and athletics; Edgar McIntosh, assistant superintendent of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and Thomas Hagerman, Scarsdale superintendent, put together wellness week. More than 100 teachers and staff members led workshops and sessions on yoga, meditation, origami, nature, poetry, and more. Each day, there were three different sessions that included family art projects, nature scavenger hunts, virtual tours of aquariums, and the Scarsdale read-aloud project. Students signed up ahead of time for the synchronous and asynchronous activities and encouraged siblings to join them. The largest session, an outdoor wellness activity, had more than 800 students participating.

"We survey students and ask for reflections on everything we do, and we had a 99 percent positive response rate on this one," says Crisci. "I'm grateful to the team for putting this incredible event together."

For some districts, being available beyond the typical school day is helping students stay on track. "We asked our teachers to be accessible between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m., but some of them had students reaching out at 9 p.m.," says Lisa Riggs, assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and assessment at Gresham-Barlow School District. "We didn't specifically encourage the late nights but teachers are concerned and want to keep the relationships going."

The things you learn in unprecedented times can be very helpful," says Bonnie E. Nobiling, director of IT services for Oneonta City School District. She learned that there is such a thing as too much information. "We tried to

do lots of on-the-fly professional development for our teachers, especially those who hadn't ever used a learning management system (LMS). At the beginning, we drowned them in email. That was a bad plan."

Nobiling discovered it was better to post resources in one place and send out digests about the new materials once or twice a week. "It's better to point them in the same direction without overwhelming them — and it's better when teachers do that with their students, too."

To that end, Oneonta teachers experienced more engagement from students when they used email to send the occasional "Hey, how you doing" message and the LMS to post assignments and homework.

Above all, district leadership made it as easy as possible for teachers to deliver lessons virtually. Although Facebook was not a recommended platform, one of the kindergarten teachers started doing lessons on Facebook Live. "No one even thought about asking her to stop," says Nobiling. "She is having fun, delivering high-quality instruction, making new connections, and experiencing high participation rates."

Some teachers were holding office hours on Zoom and finding that students stopped in to just say hello and catch up.

"In a way, we have had more professional development than ever," says Nobiling. "Without the one-on-one student time our teachers have more opportunities to come together and brainstorm." During the last few weeks at home, teachers held impromptu Zoom meetings to brainstorm, share technology tips, learn new skills, and chat with each other and district leaders. "Communication between teachers, students, and administrators is at an all-time high."

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Proven Ways to Spice Up Online Learning

If your district isn't lucky enough to have an award-winning library media specialist like Shannon Miller on your team, that's okay. Miller — the innovation director of instructional technology and library media at Van Meter School District and Future Ready Librarians spokesperson — regularly shares successful activities for online learning on her blog, the Library Voice. Here are four terrific suggestions.

• **Virtual Book Clubs** — Van Meter holds book clubs for parents and students all year long, so it was a no-brainer to continue running them virtually. Miller ordered books and left them in Ziploc bags on her front porch for families to pick up. In May, she launched ten new online book clubs for sixth graders after 48 students expressed interest in joining.

• **Virtual Pop-in Story Time** — By the end of April, Miller had already done 102 virtual read-aloud sessions in which she read for ten minutes. When possible, she tied these sessions in with curricular units, such as when she read *Some Bugs* to the first graders, who were studying insects.

• **Virtual Field Trips and Author Visits** — Like many districts across the country, everyone at Van Meter was disappointed to miss out on their end-of-year field trips so Miller set up virtual field trips for every class. Students "visited" a farm in Iowa, toured the Toledo Zoo, and Skyped with an astronaut. They also participated in eight author visits.

• **Choice Boards** — A choice board is a collection of resources that takes students on a learning adventure; they get to choose where to start, the order, and which activities they want to do. The Bloomsbury Farm choice board has links to learn about farmers, farm animals, corn planting, butterflies, and how to create a digital story.