

The Pandemic Taught Us New Lessons That Strengthened Our Teaching



By Shawn Hunziker

It has taken an international pandemic to change the face of education unlike the many pieces of legislation and memos from the State Education Department. The pandemic created a need for swift shifts in learning models and teaching methods, and it required new ways to engage students. This has been a year of professional development unlike any other and it has forced educators to think outside the box and create innovative approaches and practices.

Now is the time to continue to build upon what we have learned and use these strategies to not only reshape education as we knew it but to engage students and help them reach their full potential in new ways!

For years research has suggested that the traditional setup of the classroom should change to meet the changing times, align with research, and implement evidenced-based practices that will meet the needs of the students we serve. It was during the past year that our classroom walls have expanded and we no longer have rows of students in front of us. Instead students are in classrooms that they are not only familiar with but comfortable in. Due to the pandemic and various recommendations from the CDC, Department of Health, NYSED, and the governor's executive orders, classroom instruction went remote and classrooms became virtual. Teachers were forced to convert lessons that were designed for in-person instruction to a remote learning environment. In doing that, teachers had to think of new ways to engage students.

The change in the learning environment allowed students to take a more active role in the classroom. Having been born during a time of technology and technological advances, students are more than comfortable with technology and its various uses. This allowed teachers to teach the curriculum while students took a more active role in helping with technological troubleshooting. This naturally helped to engage students by giving them a sense of ownership of the classroom and its ability to function. Students offered assistance to each other as well as staff. They played an active role and assisted in navigating the virtual classrooms; they helped with screen shares and embedding videos; they assisted in showing how to locate a document, how to access it, and how to edit it. Students were able to share different ways to write on an electronic document. They taught others about the use of "quick keys" and assisted with the things that could really bog a teacher down. Throughout remote learning, students offered ideas that helped make the virtual learning experience efficient. It became evident that students had high

skill levels to manage a virtual environment. Then the question changed: Now that students are logged in, how do we engage them and keep them as active participants?

This new way of teaching demanded new ways to engage students, who could easily tune us out, and there was little we could do with our toolbox of pre-Covid strategies. We no longer had the ability to go over and tap a student's shoulder and remind them to focus; proximity was no longer a strategy, and we no longer had a means to reward the student who is extrinsically motivated. As educators, we had to think of new ways to motivate and engage students in the learning process and look for ways to make the learning process inviting and enjoyable.

One of our major takeaways was the importance of online community meetings. As educators, we had to think of new ways to build our learning community. One way this was accomplished was through the use of frequent online community meetings. These meetings usually had a theme that was tied to student interests and it involved dialogue from the students. It was during this time that teachers could build rapport with students by showing their understanding and warmth, and students could express their feelings as well as establish the online protocols, expectations, and norms. It was during these meetings that teachers sought student input and introduced the "skill of the week." The teachers would often work with the students and have them role-play the skill being taught. Community meetings, which were the highlight for many students, were a low-stakes way to encourage them to log on, and then teachers could help transition them into their academic classes. These online community meetings helped to set the tone and culture for this new classroom experience. It was these community meetings that kept the human connection intact, as we know students do not learn from people they do not like!

We quickly determined that there needs to be a diversity of instructional approaches (not just some direct instruction and then some offline independent work). Teachers

continued to learn new approaches on how to engage students in a virtual environment. Some of the strategies included interactive note taking, the embedding of videos, and incorporating new platforms such as Nearpod that have interactive activities. Many teachers started to use Jamboard and choice boards as a way to engage students. We clearly knew that a 36- to 72-minute lecture was not going to work.

Another strategy that teachers used was the breakout room. This allowed teachers not only to "group" students for small group instruction but also to select peer tutors to facilitate each room. Breakout rooms helped to break the monotony of large group instruction and allowed for greater student engagement. They allowed students to feel valued as part of a team. Breakout rooms helped to inspire creativity by facilitating peer-to-peer interaction. They allowed for inquiry learning where students could be given a topic or question to answer together. They also allowed for engagement by having students participate in jigsaw activities. The breakout rooms provided students with confidence by allowing them to speak in a small group setting. Breakout rooms also promoted student engagement by allowing the groups to work on competitive challenges that used each member's abilities and skills.

In addition to reshaping the way instruction was delivered, this allowed us to look internally at our own systems. As a result, the way we conduct our brick and mortar in-school suspension room known as the alternative learning environment (ALE) also changed. Pre-Covid students would be sent to this room for a specific length of time and teachers would send down the work that the student would do either independently or with the help of an ALE staff member. The problem with this is that the student was missing out on direct instruction and oftentimes did not complete the work assigned to them. Now, since we have implemented remote instruction, we have changed the face of ALE. When students are sent to ALE, they are given a Chromebook and they log

into the teacher's classroom and attend the class virtually, thus maximizing instructional time while maintaining order in the classroom. It is our goal to continue to build upon this new system and leave behind the days of students sitting silently at a desk staring at the walls or trying to complete work without the direct instruction that went with it.

Another valuable lesson we learned was the importance of home visits. Home visits, utilizing social protocols, were important because they provided students with social emotional support, helping them develop a sense of security from knowing that teachers cared enough to come and visit them. The visits also helped build rapport. This not only met the needs of the students but also helped our teachers grow. It was through these visits that teachers got a better sense of what our students face every day. As the saying goes, "A picture is worth a thousand words." This was beneficial because it allowed the faculty to meet with students and families in an environment that they were comfortable in.

The 2020-21 school year will in-

deed be one for the history books, but as with any time in history, there are valuable lessons to be learned from it. As educators, we tell our students the importance of history and how it helps prevent us from making the same mistakes. It should be our goal that we become a new and improved brand, taking the ideas that we implemented during pandemic teaching and applying them to new situations. We will one day look back and refer to the pre-Covid days and how the pandemic shaped and changed our post-Covid days. We must continue to be heroic educators who use resilience, dedication, and focus to create meaningful learning opportunities for students in new ways. We are the ones who have the opportunity to go down in history as the catalysts of change. In order to do that, we must build our students' capacity, we must help them reach their full potential, and we must build upon the gains we have made during this era of pandemic teaching. The major lesson learned is that we, as educators, have the ability to navigate difficult times and that we must

continue to challenge ourselves, think outside the box, and be creative when it comes to looking for ways to engage students. Lastly, during this heroic educational transformation let's give kudos to our educators, who have embraced the challenges, demonstrated a desire to learn, and continue to find inspiration in their colleagues. The other heroes are our students, who demonstrated resilience and perseverance, and continue to rise to the expectations. They have truly played an active role in helping to shape the new face of education.

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