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Top 5 Things I've Learned About Teaching Online, Spring 2020

I asked a variety of teachers who taught online using Zoom or Google Classroom in the Spring of 2020 to share their Top 5 insights about teaching online. I've collected their responses below and will continue updating as more roll in.

Highschool Drama Teacher (Monticello High School)

1. Don't expect to be able to make virtual classes as exciting or enriching as in person classes. They can't be no matter how brilliant a teacher you are.
2. Bring the energy right away. Make contact with each individual person, give them a challenge to begin class. I always start by asking easy crazy questions like "Worst sandwich you ever ate" or "A food you secretly like that no one else does" or "The last song that you sang to yourself" or whatever. This can take the form of an improv game where they have to think up challenge questions for each other.
3. The content is less important than the connection. These kids are starved for something outside their four walls. Listen to them. Find out about them. Let them get to know each other. I have noticed that my most outgoing, gregarious kids are rather quiet on line. You have to be "extra" to draw them out.
4. Show and tell is a great ice breaker. You can challenge them to bring an object to share. We also like to make faces. That's one thing that actually translates better remotely.
5. Self-discovery is the most important thing you can teach them. As they learn more about themselves, they learn how to help form a community, and they become comfortable telling stories. Sharing stories is what connects us, right?

6th and 7th grade Latin teacher at Tandem Friends School

1. Be gentle with yourself.

It's hard to go online when so much of what you lean on for making connections with kids is your ability to be present and physically with them. Showing up is hard and doing it at all is worth celebrating - it's not going to be the same, and that's okay. Being virtually present can still impact your kids in ways you can't yet imagine!

2. Try new things! Even if they don't go according to plan, your kids will appreciate seeing something new!

I was eager to show my kids platforms and resources they HADN'T used before. Did this always go well? Of course not - sometimes it went spectacularly wrong. But trust your kids to roll with the punches and adapt to whatever you throw their way.

3. Allow as much time for fun as possible.

I've had a difficult time reconciling what I was SUPPOSED TO GET THROUGH/DO with what was ACTUALLY happening in my online classes (see #1). When I let go of the idea that things had to be a certain way, I was more empowered to allow plenty of time for FUN THINGS (...some of which related to content-area and some didn't at all). These were some of my most joyful moments online - allowing the kids to share themselves and be absurd together without worrying about finishing an assignment.

4. Be intentional about taking time away from your screen outside of "school".

Whew, it is exhausting to stare at a screen for hours on end when you're used to being with people face-to-face instead. When my school day was "done", I made sure to not just tune into Netflix. It was really helpful for my mind (and spirit, let's be honest) to read, go outside, try new recipes and all of the other things that weren't connected to my laptop.

5. Lean on your people (friends, colleagues, family, whomever).

One of the things that helped me keep my sanity during the transition to (and throughout) online learning was an ongoing text thread with two colleagues from my school - we were able to share things that went beautifully, lament when other plans didn't and lift each other up when something was feeling particularly hard. Connecting with people who got what I was going through in a context outside of the realm of our workspace was super powerful for me.

Highschool Drama Teacher (Charlottesville High School)

1. The Zooms tend to work best when there are fewer people per meeting (at least with scene work).
2. I tend to tell the kids who are in the "audience" to mute themselves and even take their faces off the camera when we are "staging" -- which is so that the focus is on the actors. (So more of a scene study format).
- 3 There still is a performance, and the audience still wants to listen-- we just have to really work at creating authentic and engaging audience experiences online.
- 4 Students are eager to create /write and share (and they know technology way better than us-- like you mentioned today).

5. Creating a successful theatre production often feels most successful when we (directors) render ourselves obsolete. We are no longer exactly able to be obsolete because we have to re-imagine a space (which is not limited to the stage). Ultimately it is anywhere that exists within our imaginations and shared experiences. Technology cannot replace the connections and emotions that we share when we are acting.-- it can help to refine our skills as dancers, singers, voice actors, animators, movie editors, but it is ultimately artificial. So really the online theatre teaching work is a time to focus on skill development. This does not mean turning inward, but --- an opportunity to develop skills that were perhaps previously lacking or less important when everything is "normal."

Theology and Fine Arts Teacher at The Covenant School (Upper School)

Top 5 Things I've Learned

1. If you aren't familiar with Zoom/Google Meet/Hangouts (whatever video conferencing platform you are using), ask questions or participate in tutorials.
2. Mix up your spaces where you are video conferencing but do trial runs with those spaces - testing lighting, sound, etc.
3. For teaching choreo/musical theatre, there are still resources on Instagram from some incredible choreographers doing live classes or have their material still available. Do a class with them!
4. Encourage your students/campers to be in spaces where there won't be tons of interruptions...no one needs to see dad walking in his underwear behind you.
5. Be prepared to be potentially more exhausted from the amount of screen time (if you haven't already been doing a lot of it since quarantine). Curt Thompson MD a psychiatrist talks about how it can make us even more exhausted and gave language to speak to how I know many were feeling:

"One of several things that COVID-19 has revealed is that our thinking minds are not able to make up for what our bodies—and our bodies alone—were created for. Our bodies, in fact, are looking for the presence of other bodies, as it were—and they're not there. But that doesn't mean that the anticipation mechanism that expects someone to be there in an embodied fashion stops working. Rather, like a cell phone that keeps "looking" for cell service that isn't there will drain the battery that much quicker, so we are much more tired when our bodies can't find each other in real time and space."

Lead Teacher, Community Public Charter School (a middle school)

1. (This one maaaaay not apply outside of the school year.) Think about all of the awesome, amazing things you would want to do with your kiddos in person. Then, cut the amount of those things in half. I know, it hurts, especially if it's a content you love to teach. There are SO many variables present in virtual learning that just aren't present in an in-person learning experience -- siblings that need to be watched while an adult is at work; internet that cuts out; teenagers oversleeping ... Keep the big ideas or big goals of your course/class in mind while you design. For example, if you want kids to grow in their understanding of Shakespeare, maybe (for now) cut the analysis activities that are tangentially Shakespeare-related that you would include in an in-person class.
2. Be as explicit as possible with **e v e r y t h i n g**. Expectations, explanations of how to do things, content, etc. If you're writing it out with check-boxes on a Google slide, great; if you can create a video or screencast, even better! Parents often commented on how helpful it would be to cue up a screencast explaining how an activity works so they could support their child. It's a brave new world for pretty much all of us.
3. Connect! If you can, schedule smaller groups or one-on-one time with your kiddos via zoom outside of larger class sessions, or have a drop-in time for families to ask questions about things they're working on.
4. Give frequent, specific feedback. In a remote environment, we're missing the millions of little ways we give kids informal feedback during in-person learning. If kiddos are sharing work asynchronously, schedule a small chunk of time each day to look over their work and leave specific feedback that will help them grow in their learning! If you have time to create a short response video for a kid, even better -- again, you're continuing to forge that personal relationship with your students!
5. Be SO kind to yourself. Activities that you've done repeatedly in your in-person class may totally fail online. That doesn't mean you're a terrible teacher -- it's just something that doesn't work well in a virtual environment as-is. Take some time to reflect and readjust, but don't let it prevent you from taking risks.