A Global Pandemic: The Ultimate Test of Teacher Adaptation

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Making a foolproof lesson plan is impossible when it comes to teaching. Sure, one might have engaging techniques and every minute filled with an activity, but it is almost guaranteed that something will throw a wrench in it. We never know how the students will react, if technology will work flawlessly, or if there will be a drill of some sort to ruin the perfect lesson. Teachers have been able to adapt to any of these situations and change their plans in a second. It is a very useful skill a teacher has and uses daily. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in spring of 2020, teachers were thrown into a whole new fire: online teaching. In a quick turnaround, teachers had to learn not only how to do their jobs online, but also how to help students learn how to learn online.

Teachers found a way to adjust to the ultimate curveball of turning their practice upside down and learning an entirely new job in a short amount of time. Their lives, communities, and institutions changed in an instance. I think of when this first occurred in March 2020, and the first thing I did was call my colleagues on my team to figure out what to do. I knew there was no way I would make it through without my coworkers because this situation was going to be very new and very challenging. Many teachers adapted to this situation and helped parents, students, coworkers, and their own families adjust to this new normal. We started making screencasts to show students where to find things, as well as many announcements on Canvas to keep students on top of tasks and aware of what was coming up. We still do this in online learning, and it is incredibly beneficial.

While it is amazing these teachers could change their profession overnight, it might be more interesting to analyze how teachers adapted to their students' learning needs in an online setting. At first, my team and I focused on how to meet students' needs and be compassionate about their new normal. However, once we realized this would continue, we had to come up with ways to keep education equitable for all students, whether traditional, hybrid, or virtual.

The first issue many educators faced was students' equitable access to technology. Muir describes the majority of disadvantages to teaching online as lack of access to technology and the resources that go along with it (7). Administrators and educators came together to find technology for these students to keep an equitable practice for those who might not have access to the resources at home; our district provided loaner laptops to any students who needed them, and this helped with equity. This problem had to be tackled first and foremost or students would fall behind their peers. Teachers advocated for their students and worked with parents, just like they might in the physical classroom environment, to make sure equity was not a problem. Teachers took the time to learn the struggles the students faced and made sure to practice the flexibility they have used in their profession as long as they have been in it.

In my own practice, I have been virtual teaching for about one year for the students who do not feel safe with the brick-and-mortar setting. Even with as much time as we have been working online, we still deal with internet failures, bad connections, and

inability to access technology applications. I work with my students to problem solve and face all troubleshooting with compassion because my students matter, and I know this is as hard on them as it can be on me. We talk out problems; I point them in the right direction for technological help if I cannot solve it myself, and we all practice a lot of patience. However, with this huge curveball of online education thrown at all stakeholders, teachers like me were able to adjust to ensure their students' education continued during the pandemic, no matter what the format may be.

Once technological resources were broadly available, the next obstacle became personalizing education to support all students, as teachers did in their physical classrooms. "Even if full personalization is not possible in face-to-face teaching, the teacher can develop different versions of the teaching material so that to fit to the learning styles of the largest number of students [sic]," and that is what teachers set out to do (Franzoni and Assar 28). In my own experience as a teacher during this time, I had to find ways to accommodate all of my learners, as well as adjust feedback and communication with them. It became increasingly hard once an online element was added in to address where students struggle and help them to understand how to improve. I spent time fiddling with resources (Google Voice, Canvas discussions, and Remind) that would improve my students' understanding and finding ways to get in contact with them that allowed for personal responses and feedback. At the same time, I wanted to keep an open line of communication for clarity and discussion when we did lessons or if they had questions on their feedback and grades. I, like most teachers, had the benefit of knowing my students prior to the transition to online and knew how to personalize lessons for them, but it still

required huge amounts of adjusting on many of us. However, as the next year rolled around, and we realized the pandemic would still be a factor, I quickly learned how to get to know 150 new students I had never interacted with in person. I spent weeks learning their learning styles and accommodations through analyzing messages they sent me, communicating during office hours, and just noticing what tripped them up as they learned. Through this, I have been able to cater my instruction to my students in a more personalized way as a virtual teacher, like I would in a traditional classroom. While we may use Canvas modules, Nearpod, and Padlet more often to engage in our lessons, we still find ways to accommodate learning needs and make the lessons as engaging as the physical classroom.

Flexibility became another issue teachers had to adjust their definition of and work with a different scope. Kirkwood and Price stated, "Educational provision is changing significantly, and distance educators have a leading role to play in developing flexible programmes for prospective students coming from a variety of backgrounds, contexts, and geographical locations" (10). During the pandemic, teachers were faced with this challenge. Students were no longer coming to school to do their work during the hours given; they were now juggling their jobs, family responsibilities, and the stress of not knowing what to expect from the situation. Teachers adapted to assist students, while tackling their own challenges of family responsibilities, stress, and other issues that may require solutions.

I still struggle with setting boundaries for work and my own life but have realized the importance of space from the career when one works in the same place they live, as I have been working from home for the entirety of the pandemic. It continues to be a struggle, but I have continued to adapt by

logging off and finding time to do things I love beyond teaching. This has helped me from burning out as much as I could during this difficult time. I encourage my students to do the same through creative writing outlets, online discussions about non-subject things, and trying to engage as much as I can of things that I know they enjoy, allowing for some burnout to be taken off of them during the school day.

Teacher adaptation has always been of the utmost importance to the profession, but in a global pandemic, teachers not only had to adapt to their students, but to a nationwide shift in education. While there were times of immense stress and feelings of being lost, teachers made it seem effortless and as if they had been training for this for years, as opposed to a few days to a few weeks. Teachers have been training for this for years, though. Every time a lesson went less than according to plan or a student acted out during a lecture, teachers were working on their adaptation that would lead to the ultimate test in flexibility. While this pandemic of COVID-19 added a huge curveball to teaching, it just showed what teachers have known all along: we are the ultimate adaptors and will continue to care for our students in any situation, no matter how far away from us they are. Keep it up, teachers; we've got this.

Works Cited

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