Pedagogical Recalibration or Innovation?

By **Tom Daccord,** *an international education technology consultant and co-founder,* EdTechTeacher

Wile the threat of coronavirus looms, students are stuck at home and educators are left rethinking the role of technology in teaching and learning. Suddenly, even the most recalcitrant technology adopter is learning how to videoconference and manage a course online—ready or not.

Many progressive educators hope the proliferation of remote teaching will lead to a surge of innovation in classroom practice. More specifically, they hope that teachers will leverage technology as a tool to nurture active-learning environments where students think through problems, communicate their ideas, collaborate with others, create multi-media content, and share knowledge with an authentic audience. In short, they hope that students will gain more control over learning.

A silver lining of this global pandemic is the huge opportunity it provides to rethink the student learning process. That said, if pedagogical innovation occurs at all, it likely won't happen right away. Innovation in instructional practice can only take place if educators are willing to accept a fundamental change in the student-teacher dynamic. That remains to be seen.

Many teachers are at what I'd term "Level 1" of remote-teaching adaptation: focusing on a video-conferencing platform in the hopes of reconstructing their lost classroom—the place where they are accustomed to "teaching" students. As the certainty and familiarity of the physical classroom are torn down, many teachers are fervently trying to construct a similar environment online. They are adjusting to a new coronavirus reality by clinging to a fundamental remnant of the past.

If teachers believe they can successfully "recreate" their classrooms online, they are not likely to rethink student learning. They might be immersed in a novel environment, but they will evaluate success in terms of the efficiency technology brings to how they have always taught.

Organizational psychologist Robert Evans points out that teacher discomfort with change often comes from fear of redefining what it means to be proficient. Teachers are now under enormous pressure to be proficient in an environment that challenges their preconceived notions. For some, this will be enough to help modify their own basic assumptions and reconsider what it means to teach and learn. Others will be reluctant to do so.

A middle school teacher said to me recently: "Coronavirus is not going to last 10 years. This is just an interruption." In other words, why expend energy investigating how technology might empower student learning when it's "just a matter of time until we get back to normal?"

For true innovation to occur, teachers have to want to implement a change. They also must feel it's appropriate, promising, and manageable. But pressure can prompt change. Testing is one example of a pressure that can direct or redirect teacher energy.

Because of coronavirus, most high stakes assessments have been canceled. Administrators should view this as an opportunity to work with teachers on reconsidering their balance of formative and summative assessments. Together, they can examine how to leverage the wealth of information that virtual classrooms provide about the student thought process. After all, student activities can be recorded. Google Docs offers a "version history" to see all student edits to a document. This may also lead us to consider a shift toward competency-based grading. In any event, now is the time to evaluate the worthiness of summative assessments and interim tests.

Under normal circumstances, many schools already fail to develop a galvanizing vision of how learning can be different when technology is introduced. Classroom teachers are too often expected to "figure it out" everytime a new device or platform arrives. Moreover, training sessions too often center on nuts-and-bolts tech and not instructional vision. Those school leaders who can nurture a shared vision of desired learning co-constructed by both administration and staff will find more success guiding their community on a coordinated path towards a desirable goal. Without a vision, teachers will likely not adopt a new mindset.

There's much speculation that schools will not return to normal anytime soon. Recent articles in CNN and USA Today relate that many school leaders envision alternating schedules where schooling at least partly remains online. If this proves true, the present context for schooling may continue for a long while. So, where is the sense of urgency to develop student-centric and interactive instructional environments?

There are signs of hope. Somewhat ironically, pedagogical change is starting to occur while teachers attempt to ensure continuity.

Teachers are quickly recognizing that students can't be expected to sit hour-after-hour in a video conference room. As a result, they are beginning to construct experiences where students are more in control of the learning process. These teachers are at what I'd term "Level 2" of remote-teaching adaptation: focusing on interactive, multimedia student-centric activities.

At "Level 2," teachers are moving beyond fillable PDFs to help students learn to make videos, record podcasts, design multimedia books, and otherwise demonstrate learning. Often, these experiences consist of combining multiple pieces of technology into one unified experience. An increasing number of educators are participating in "how-to-with-multimedia" webinars. EdTechTeacher has seen thousands of teachers sign up for these types of virtual training in the last three weeks. This is a huge jump from the norm.

It doesn't stop there. Teachers at "Level 3" are rethinking models of instruction and exploring unifying frameworks that are student centered, foster inquiry, independence, problem solving and creativity in a remote setting. For instance, problem-based projects that are designed to span multiple days and weeks can be completed by students remotely and independently thanks to collaborative technologies. Level 3 teachers will prompt innovations to foster learning environments that promote the application of student knowledge in authentic and challenging ways.

No one is saying this will be easy. Planning for remote learning is challenging as it requires educators to rethink many face-to-face processes that work effectively in a live classroom environment. Teachers are being forced to do this on the fly. From lesson and project redesign, to collaboration, feedback and assessment, teaching and learning will often look and feel different in an online or remote environment.

Plenty of "disruptive" technologies have been introduced in society over the last two decades while teaching remained static. No matter how powerful, creative, or versatile a device or tool, teachers can't be expected to change without a motivating reason and an idea of what beneficial change actually looks like. Right now, energizing teachers to formulate a new vision for remote learning is the priority.

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