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COVID Notes from the Field: Differentiation in the Digital Classroom

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Abstract

This piece summarizes one teacher's experiences during the abrupt move to digital learning due to COVID 19. This is not a full research study.

Keywords

differentiation, COVID 19, digital learning

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The 4th quarter in the spring semester of 2020 hit teachers and students like a ton of bricks. When it was announced that schools would be closing for at least two weeks, it sounded like it would be fun. Working from home? Unheard of as a teacher! You mean I can sip my coffee at a leisurely pace, go to the bathroom whenever I feel like, and mute my students with the click of a button? Sign me up for this digital learning plan! As teachers across the country prepped video lessons, set up Zoom classes, and learned *just a few more* skills, we thought, *ok, this can't be so bad*. Students were excited to sleep in a little, work at their own pace, and have at least two weeks off from school. How bad can this be? As two weeks stretched into three, and then spring break followed, it became clear that digital learning wouldn't be coming to an end as soon as we had thought. With the Governor's announcement for schools to close for the rest of the year, we knew we were in it for the long haul. Too much of a good thing renders it substantially less good. Digital learning used leisurely-drunk coffee, unplanned bathroom breaks, and the "Mute All" button to disguise the sadness that began creeping in as teachers came to the realization they would no longer see their students in-person. Never again would this group of students be "ours". Lucky for the nation, teachers are a resilient bunch. We wiped our tears, regrouped, and differentiated our lesson plans to fit this new learning environment for all of our students.

If there was ever a "right" time for my 7th-grade Language Arts class to transition to digital learning, the first week of quarantine was it. I was wrapping up my drama unit on *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Each morning I uploaded a video of myself to Google Classroom that I filmed using Screencastify. It would consist of a small window of my face in the corner with the daily agenda as the main video for my students to hear me explain in my own real words (as true to class as possible) the work that needed to get done for the day. In addition, I had a daily Zoom call in which we held class as normally as possible. We had two scenes left to read, so I would assign roles to students on Zoom, unmute those students, and we would read the play together. Finally, I would have them complete some sort of reading check and then fill out a checklist that I created on Google Forms. The checklist simply listed out one by one everything they should have done to mark Language Arts work complete for the day. I was trying my best to 1) tell them what to do, 2) do it with them, and 3) tell them what they did as a means to make sure they always understood what was needed for my class on any given day. I stuck to this format for the last two weeks of reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*. In providing my students with directions for the day spoken aloud in a video, written out in a post, and then written out again in a list that required kinesthetics in checking boxes, I was confident that all students would at least *know* what work need to get done (whether or not they chose to do it was another story).

Upon finishing *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the circumstances we were now facing allowed my 7th graders to understand what Anne Frank was dealing with in a way that my previous students had never related before. Without meaning to sound irreverent, it was easy for my students to put themselves in her shoes. On Zoom, we tried our best to have a discussion as normally as possible, and I did have to remind them that 1) they were not forced to be silent during the day, 2) they were not being persecuted for their religion nor was a war going on around them, 3) they were allowed to at least go outside, and 4) they had the added benefit of electronics to keep them entertained. In lieu of a big essay, project, or test, I wanted this unit to culminate in a way that would actually mean something for my students. In an effort to give every student the chance to create something that would showcase their learning in a way that suits them, I simply gave prompts I wanted them to answer but allowed them to present those prompts however they wanted. I asked students to create a diary of some kind just as Anne had. They could choose to write it out in a narrative in a Google Doc, present it in using main points in a Google Slides, or create a vlog answering the questions. Five of the prompts dealt with problems faced and/or related to in the book - what gifts would you make for your family if you couldn't go shopping, what would you bring with you if you were going into hiding in one hour, how would you fill your days if you were Anne, respond to Anne's final line: "in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart", and what are your thoughts about keeping a diary? In addition to answering those five prompted questions, students had to chronicle their daily routine over the course of five quarantine days. This final project for the unit allowed my students the freedom to present the information in a way that suited them while reflecting on and relating to our characters and their lives.

As I grade these projects now, I am blown away with the work that is done. Not once this year in normal school days have I received work as thoughtful and detailed as I did for this project. I like to believe it's because I did such a great job teaching this unit and gave them the freedom to express themselves how they saw fit, but I know it's because it was a great way to make meaning during these monotonous days. No matter the reason for the quality work, I am feeling so many emotions as I read and observe their day-to-day lives right now. Gone are the baseball practices, dance recitals, and play rehearsals. In their place? Family game night, cooking classes as taught by Mom, sibling bike rides, brother-sister movie hour, basketball in the driveway, workouts presented by idolized pop stars across the country, and video calls with friends. These overbooked, technology-obsessed preteens/teenagers are learning the value of pressing the reset button every now and then. In an assignment that I thought would help my students relate their current situation to even a fraction of Anne Frank's situation, I learned so much about my

students. I missed them before I read these diaries, but I would give anything to hug them and remind them of the good they are doing each and every day.

I will be wrapping up the year with our third and final novel, S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*. To help all of my students as we study and analyze the characters, themes, and time period, I am doing things quite differently. Each day we Zoom and read together as a class. I read aloud asking students to follow along and annotate as we go. I would usually spot check for understanding with discussion questions and comprehension checks, but that doesn't quite work anymore. Instead, students are using Google Slides to fill out information as we read each chapter regarding characters, time period, and main themes. In using this format instead, my students have the opportunity to contribute in some way even if they aren't totally confident in something. Usually discussions open them up for criticism from their peers, but not anymore. Now they have the freedom to respond to my usual discussion points without fear of judgment. This work will take us through the rest of the year, so they will continue to fill out this Google Slides as we continue on in the book. It wasn't how I originally envisioned teaching this book, but nothing about spring 2020 is going how I envisioned. Par for the course.

When given a challenge, teachers will always rise. Our kids can't be in the classroom anymore? That's ok. We'll bring the classroom to them. Some days it isn't all that different anyway - *didn't I just say that?* was a frequent question I asked myself in January. Now I say it out loud as I *want* to respond to a student's email with *GO CHECK GOOGLE CLASSROOM, AND FOR GOD'S SAKE, WATCH MY VIDEO THAT I RECORDED NO FEWER THAN 10 TIMES TO GET IT PERFECT!!!* No matter the situation, we answer that same question again and again. So while some things are the same, not everything is. It's the good morning fist bumps, birthday songs, and Friday-last-period, no-control-over-the-class-anymore belly laughs we miss most. No amount of time spent on Zoom (even with the deletion of the 40-minute time limit) can replace those feelings. Nothing can. So as teachers everywhere differentiate, we do it with a little bit of sadness. We're happy to see our kids on video, happy to be able to continue the teaching and learning, and happy to respond to every email question for just a glimpse of the relationships we spent 7 and a half months nurturing. We do it, but we miss you. We miss you, but we know things can only get better from here. As a final reminder from some of my favorite Van Morrison lyrics: "When it's not always raining there'll be days like this/When there's no one complaining there'll be days like this/When everything falls into place like the flick of a switch/Well my mama told me there'll be days like this."