Maximizing Distance Learning

Marcia Baldanza

My best friends are parents of school-aged children as well as educators; all of us are keenly interested in providing exceptional learning experiences for students. Our conversations usually revolve around parenting teenagers, pedagogy, teaching materials, assessment, equity, technology, and the like. This is not new, but since March, these conversations have taken a new twist. Since we all are engaged in teaching and assessing online as well as making sure our own children are learning, our communications now are often centered on online pedagogy, online materials, online assessment, online norms, and online equity.

Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and John Hattie offer a glimpse into their new book, ***The Distance Learning Playbook***. I used three themes at the heart of Hattie's ***10 Mindframes for Visible Learning*** as this article's three big ideas.

Investment in learning means that there is a drive to foster each student's increasing ability to recognize when they are learning, when they are not, and how to go about fixing it. (Hattie)
That means that teacher clarity and feedback are crucial. Put yourself in the shoes of the student. Ask what it is like to learn this way and how can you make it better. Some feel isolated and alone and others thrive in solitude. Still, knowing each student and his or her needs and preferences helps you be strategic and inclusive with your planning, teaching, assessing, and feedback. Check out "**Providing Effective Student Feedback**" by Susana Rent and Cathy-Jo Swain of the University of New England. This webinar offers great insights and resources (listed at the beginning) and reminds us of the qualities of good feedback and offers ways to provide this online. It is definitely worth watching.

Good feedback is:	Good feedback also:
Timely	Highlights a specific knowledge or skill
Instructional	Focuses on thinking (not writing mechanics)
Consistent	Moves a student's work forward
	Provides a model or example
	Invites the student to give the instructor feedback
	Encourages the student to ask for the kind of feedback needed

Teachers know the impact of their instruction in terms of progress and achievement and take steps to refine their approaches. (Hattie)
That means that we have methods for discovering what students already know in order to minimize wasted instructional time such that we can focus on needed learning experiences. Further, the individual student is the unit of analysis -we know what works, what works when, and what works for whom. Take what works in the classroom and adapt it to a virtual setting. We know that students learn when they are able to talk with each other and process their learning. However, in a Zoom class, that can be challenging. I downloaded my favorite **Learning Buddy** structure (**Reading Quest Strategies | Clock Buddies**), filled in the names and asked the students for cell numbers. We will use this structure to call in place of meeting. (Multiple **Learning Buddy** templates for different age levels and content areas are available in the ***Why Didn't I Learn This in College?* Online Tools and Templates library** as **Tools 6, 7, 10, 11, 18, 31, 35,** and **54**.) and the ***Active Learning and Engagement Strategies* Online Tools and Templates Tools 23 to 31.** Creating virtual break-out rooms is another effective approach to mimic cooperative groupings. The best I've encountered have a full class meeting and then send students to a different "room" based on interest. Hattie tells us, "What should not be lost is that as a field we learned more about what works by at times experiencing what didn't work in a virtual setting. It heightened our sense of what we already knew in face-to-face classrooms." Paraphrasing the authors of *The Distance Learning Playbook* that is

- Foster student self-regulation to move learning to deeper levels

- Accelerate learning by teaching students to be in control of their learning. Diversify instructional approaches; go beyond direct instruction followed by offline independent work.
- Use carefully crafted peer learning to impact understanding.
- Integrate feedback into the learning cycle.

Mindframes of teachers – their dispositions and beliefs – are in the driver's seat. (Hattie)

That means that we collaborate with one another, talk about learning more than teaching, and invest in relationships with children and adults in order to be an agent of change. Online teaching requires a different mindframe. My son's school did a very good job at delivering online teaching for the final quarter of the school year. With the quick pivot, many of the teachers worked to design new and engaging methods and some taught the way they would in the classroom. Those who planned asynchronous sessions, found related materials to post, and designed projects fared better that those who lectured each class and provided online tests and quizzes. The mindset shift requires that we think about our content in modules and not days or periods. Time takes on a different meaning in the world of online and on demand learning. When we think about what we want the learners to know and be able to do, we can create large chunks of content that can be delivered asynchronously and synchronously, with the asynchronous aspect to be completed on the learner's time, not necessarily on Thursday at 9:35 am, for example. Zoom fatigue is real; work to avoid it! Flower Darby held a really informative webinar that is easily transferable to all educators, "**Online Teaching Basics: Improving Student Learning While Saving Faculty Time**."

I believe that these three themes are true whether we are teaching in a face-to-face or distant learning environment. Wherever we find ourselves in the fall, keep these themes in mind. I know I will certainly do so in my graduate classes!