



Just for the ASKing!

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Ten Success Stories in the Age of COVID-19



Bruce Oliver, the author of *Just for the ASKing!*, lives in Burke, Virginia. He uses the knowledge, skills, and experience he acquired as a teacher, professional developer, mentor, and middle school principal as he works with school districts in across the nation. He has written more than 200 issues of *Just for the ASKing!* Bruce is the author of *Points to Ponder* and also a co-author of *Creating a Culture for Learning: Your Guide to PLCs and More.*

During these pressure-filled times I have found myself reading about the impact distance learning has had on our educators. It saddened me to realize how life has changed so dramatically for so many individuals. Many personal stories I read were heart-breaking and unsettling. I decided to contact some individuals to see how they were coping with teaching (and learning) responsibilities under these extraordinary circumstances. I especially wanted to know if there were things that they were doing that were working in terms of what they have learned, how their students were responding, and how current conditions were impacting their state of mind.

Below are their stories along with thoughts they shared with me.

“I had to figure out some ways to lighten my work load. I was exhausted all the time.”

A veteran teacher began her virtual teaching experience by devising lessons that tended to work with her students. She is a very detail-oriented individual so her lessons were well thought out and complete. However, she frequently found herself working until 11 p.m. each night to prepare for the next day. Despite any success she experienced, she became overly tired and mentally drained; she started to wonder if she could sustain such a wearisome schedule. A very independent thinker, she chose to plan and work alone. As she eventually admitted, she did not feel her colleagues could adhere to her high standards. When total exhaustion set in, she went against her better judgment and reached out to her fellow teachers with the idea that working together as a team made great sense. By opening her mind, she realized that her compatriots were capable, creative, and just as hard working as she was. She had misjudged them. The group set aside planning time that included different individuals taking on responsibilities for lesson design and material creation. Her life changed for the better once she acknowledged she had undervalued her colleagues.

“I found it difficult to maintain my train of thought with so many student interruptions.”

Adapting to distance learning was quite an adjustment for some folks. Very few (if any) students were comfortable turning on their cameras. Initially they did not turn on their microphones either. With their teacher’s encouragement, some of the students activated their mics. Slowly, more students joined in and began to show their personalities. In a very short time, the teacher found her lessons descended into chaos with many individuals talking simultaneously and making her lesson flow ill-fated. The answer to her dilemma came in the form of the chat room. She explained the concept to her classes and set up a set of procedures for her learners to follow, especially the way her students dealt with their questions. By applying the chat room concept, her students could pose questions for the whole class, or submit a question privately for the teacher. The chat room option meant that lessons could flow more smoothly. The use of chat rooms led her to learn about other strategies she could apply including breakout rooms and Google applications such as Google Meet. With each successive idea she took on, her confidence and effectiveness grew. Over time, she realized that her students were not completing much work after class. For this reason she began placing students in breakout groups to complete assignments that were not likely to be done outside class. She revealed that one of her favorite influences was “7 Tips for Breakout Room Success” by Stephanie Rothstein.

“If you are comfortable presenting yourself to your kids, they will get on board.”

The quote above was a realization by a teacher after adjusting to virtual learning. At the beginning, things were, at best, awkward. Her delivery was stilted with too many unnecessary pauses waiting for her students to react or respond. At the end of her lessons, she wondered if any learning at all was occurring. As she quietly reflected, she remembered a message that she had learned during her pre-teaching days: “It’s all about relationships!” She began interacting with her students in a personal way, sharing information about herself, and asking them questions about their lives and interests. Over time, her comfort level improved, and her interaction with her students evolved so well that they “came to life.” Cameras were turned on, microphones opened up. She remembered what she had learned about social-emotional learning. She consistently began her lessons with a positive message; the reaction was lots of smiles and laughter. She quietly reflected telling herself that there was no turning back but simply even more avenues ahead to continued success.



“I agonized over my inability to teach all the standards I was supposed to include in my lessons – until reality set it.”

Here is a teacher’s perspective in her own words: “When virtual learning became a certainty, I accepted it as a doable reality. An optimist at heart, I took on my new challenge with a healthy attitude. Almost from the outset, I found myself falling behind and unable to complete my planned lessons. I was too embarrassed to share my frustration with colleagues or administrators; I was unable to share my uneasy state of mind. I thought, ‘Was I failing to meet my students’ needs?’ ‘Will they be prepared for the next grade?’ And then I came across the statement below:

In case you need to hear it: Students are not falling behind. They are surviving a pandemic. Educators: you are not behind, you are also surviving a pandemic. THANK YOU for every ounce you give!

“That’s all it took. I felt my body untense and my frustration abated. I began making plans with essential learnings at the forefront. I began devising shorter lessons, and focused more on loving my kids instead of glorifying every standard. I am a better teacher and a better person for my discovery.”

“I thought I was being creative by employing a variety of different tools in my lessons.”

It has often been said that having a repertoire of tools and learning strategies at your disposal would enhance a teacher’s ability to plan more interesting and stimulating lessons. What does not work well is overwhelming your students with too many tools at a time. When you include multiple devices in a particular lesson, it can result in too many steps for kids to remember, and eventually confusion, disorganization, puzzlement and abandonment on the part of learners sets in. Using one or two tools at a time works much better. There are far fewer questions, students can work together more easily, and teachers can monitor student progress on the assignment instead of answering so many student questions. To put it succinctly, work gets done! Another important “a-ha moment” from a classroom pro!

“I felt so relieved when I realized that I wasn’t the only one who felt like I did.”

The unknown and confusion surrounding distance learning was overwhelming to many teachers when school buildings closed down. Some individuals experienced loneliness and discouragement; they had never felt such anxiety in their careers. With good intentions, school leaders provided required professional development sessions that teachers attended virtually with the result being even more pressure that was added to an already full load of responsibilities. Some teachers cried on a regular basis but they kept it a secret from their colleagues. Eventually teachers began contacting one another and soon they realized that most people were experiencing similar emotions. As one teacher shared, “I began planning



lessons with someone I loved. We called it happy making!” As teachers collaborated, their frustrations often dissolved into laughter instead of tears because they knew they were not alone. They shared “truth telling,” they let themselves lean on one another, and their trust in one another increased with each encounter. Over time they developed a “we can get through this” attitude.

“My skills and knowledge related to technology made a huge difference in my life during the pandemic.”

It may be stating the obvious, but one variable that has made a significant difference in the lives of educators is having an affinity for technology. While many teachers struggled to figure out the basics of distance learning, others took on the new challenge with self-confidence and assurance. Additionally, many districts offered training during the summer months on a volunteer basis. Teachers learned new applications, shortcuts and practices that have stimulated their students and engaged them more fully in their learning experiences. One teacher shared that immersing himself in learning new practices when the students were on break was one of the wisest things he had ever done. Resources like Flip grid, Nearpod, Peardeck and Schoology have become commonplace. Many individuals are anticipating the return to brick and mortar learning fully knowing that many of the technology-related skills they have learned will make them better teachers in the future when they are face-to-face with their classes.

“My lessons changed when I read the statement, ‘Whenever a child learns critical thinking, a conspiracy theory dies’”

A social studies teacher shared a revelation that gave her the impetus to devise different learning experiences for her students. As she explained, when virtual learning began she followed the prescribed standards. She taught her kids about the outcome of the War of 1812, the impact of the Industrial Revolution, and the events leading up to World War I. Meanwhile, real history was occurring around her students every day. She realized she needed to change her methodology to give her youngsters more opportunities to develop critical thinking skills instead of having them ingest factual information from the past. She began providing information/opinions that were in the headlines; she taught her kids how to dig deep and find original sources of information that many people accepted as the “truth’ but, in fact, were false. She taught her students to research the origin of ideas that had led to divisiveness in our country. The response from her students was overwhelmingly positive. As one person noted, “We are really learning about stuff that has a huge impact on our lives!”



“Administrators are becoming mental health counselors and self-care resources for teachers.”

There was a time prior to the pandemic when administrators felt that their plates were completely full. During the last school year, they learned that somehow they had to make room on those plates and include things that they had never considered before. Successful leaders place their teachers at the top of their to-do lists. Here are some things supportive principals are doing:

- Some principals are able to view classes in session from their offices. As a result of observing lessons they are able to provide feedback (in many cases validating what a teacher had done well);
- With technological advances occurring at a rapid pace, leaders are able to observe how teachers are utilizing the new ideas. One principal saw her teacher using the iPad on a tripod approach so both students in the classroom as well as students at home could learn from her lesson;
- Another principal has eliminated as many meetings as possible. If it can be conveyed in a memo, there is no need to set aside time to meet;
- Some teachers are learning “new tricks” that are making a difference for their kids. The principal has encouraged her teachers to share their successes, especially shortcuts and novelties;
- Astute administrators are taking into account the social-emotional well being of their staffs; they also encourage their teachers to insert social-emotional learning into their plans. They remind their staff members, “Some kids are suffering from traumas.”
- In order to motivate their students, one principal encourages her teams to have open book tests. As she noted, “It’s okay to do some things differently. Give yourself and your kids some flexibility.”

“After each of our meetings I feel like I can breathe again.”

Many educators have learned the value of working in a team. With the advent of distance learning, the importance of planning with peers has become instrumental in their day-to-day life. As one teacher emphasized, “Collaboration is the key to my success.” Below are some of the positive reactions from educators who are embracing teamwork:

- Dividing the responsibilities and the work load has removed a huge burden off my shoulders;
- When school leaders participate in our meetings, it is clear that they want us to do well. They are honest and direct, good at posing questions, helping us to clarify our goals, and listening without judging;
- Even when we plan together, we are able to establish specific goals to meet the needs of our own students;



- The people on the team who are especially good with technology have taught the rest of us the tricks of the trade;
- We have all learned to keep open minds when we come to the meeting.
- All of us know to “leave our egos at the door” in order benefit from all the great ideas that are brought to our sessions.

Resources and References

Rothstein, Stephanie. “7 Tips for Breakout Room Success, *Edutopia*. February 9, 2021.

<https://www.edutopia.org/article/7-tips-breakout-room-success>

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