Ready or not, online teaching is here

Teachers are forced to reorient their methods due to the COVID-19 outbreak

by Caroline Smrstik Gentner
March 21, 2020

Public and private schools around the world are closing because of the COVID-19 pandemic: almost one billion children have had their schooling interrupted. The abrupt shift has put a burden on families, who are faced with a new role in their children’s day-to-day learning. School administrators, and especially teachers, also find themselves in uncharted waters.

Thanks to digital communication tools and learning platforms, schools have many paths to enable teaching to children at home. The immediate change to remote teaching is forcing many administrators and teachers to come to terms with a shift that would have happened anyway. The global experiment currently underway is likely to highlight both the strengths and weaknesses of teaching online.

“The global experiment currently underway is likely to highlight both the strengths and weaknesses of teaching online.”

The COVID-19 outbreak is in different phases in different parts of the world. We talked with teachers from various school systems in Zurich (Switzerland), Maryland (US), and Seoul (South Korea) about how they are managing to support their students during these unusual times.

Zurich, Switzerland

In Switzerland, all schools were closed starting March 16. At the end of the first week of closures, there was uncertainty and, because of the country’s local autonomy for schools, no unified approach how to teach or even if to teach.

Digital infrastructure is not critical in the country, but many teachers are concerned that the forced break will further widen the gap between children from families who place a high value on education and children from educationally-disadvantaged families.
“Many teachers are concerned that the forced break will further widen the gap between children from families who place a high value on education and children from educationally-disadvantaged families.”

Aline Lehner teaches a mixed-age class of 23 children, from kindergarten to sixth grade, at a Montessori school in Zurich, Switzerland. The school’s challenge was finding a platform that accommodated their size, could be set up quickly, and was free. They decided on Google Classroom and in a full-day session started to learn to program activities for their students. By the second day of the school closing, students were receiving individualized programs from their teachers. They return their assignments by scanning directly into Google Classroom, or by email daily, and there is a weekly drop-off and pick-up of work on paper.

Lehner says it is somewhat easier to set up tasks for the older children, but even the youngest can receive a video to help them learn to tie their shoes. The teachers have also started producing their own short videos demonstrating math with Montessori materials, for example.

“For us as teachers it’s a constant learning process,” Lehner says. Some teaching teams use more of the tools at their disposal, while others are still finding their way. Though working offsite, the teachers have exchanged ideas and tips with each other and after the first week, they plan a video conference to talk about what’s worked so far and what to adjust.

Lehner is still clearly enjoying the challenge, but also misses her students. “It really makes my day when someone sends me an email or gives feedback,” she says.

“It’s the shift in attitude, from teachers and students alike, that truly enables individual and remote learning.”

At a public secondary school in the Zurich region, teachers have had the first week to get themselves organized. Matthias Lang, a learning coach, says he and his colleagues had an easy time preparing since their school’s model is based on independent learning. They’ve already defined the time windows when teachers are available via video conference to present new material and answer questions, and Lang will continue his weekly one-to-one coaching sessions with each student in his class online.

Despite his readiness to begin schooling online, Lang says there are so many unanswered questions for teachers. Although Switzerland tentatively plans a return to the classroom April 20, no one knows what to do about tests or grades in the interim.

The shift from formal classroom teaching to online teaching is technically not a problem: putting material together is relatively simple. It’s the shift in attitude, from teachers and students alike, that truly enables individual and remote learning. Teachers have to get away from the desire to control the classroom, and let go and trust their students, Lang points out. “In the classroom when all the students are sitting there and looking at you, you can think you’ve got their attention and
they’re learning – but it’s a false sense of security,” he says.

**Maryland, US**

Nathan Diamond, a visual arts teacher at a public primary school in Maryland, US, says he and his colleagues got their instructions suddenly on Friday afternoon before schools closed on March 16. They were told to ‘encourage’ students to continue their studies and to provide some online resources – and were clearly told that work would not be graded or required.

On his own, Diamond decided to use the Schoology platform to provide his students with some resources to continue work they had started in the classroom. He began filling his virtual class with material from sources to which the school district already had a subscription, such as BrainPOP.

Since the students are not required to do the school work, the take-up has been minimal, which is frustrating. Diamond is concerned about keeping his students motivated and open to learning, so hasn’t given up. He’s also compiling online resources, such as videos or step-by-step, process-based websites, that can take students through a sequence as he would in daily instruction. The Schoology platform also allows students to submit work to their teacher, and Diamond hopes to engage students in discussions on their process and progress.

As a sign of things to come, Diamond says he was contacted by the school district’s fine arts supervisor to develop a minimum two weeks’ worth of lessons for visual art teachers in the district to continue instruction online. He plans to build on what he has already started: a first one-week unit on graphic design and logo development will have students create media, such as a poster, for an awareness campaign on a topic of their choosing. Since there is not yet any indication how long schools in Maryland will be closed, he’s expecting there will be time for his program to get off the ground.

**Seoul, South Korea**

In Seoul, South Korea, schools have been closed since February 24. Wendy Grant teaches English and writing to high schoolers, and is the school newspaper advisor, at a private school which has been using Google Classroom and Google Meets to keep classes going. The teachers at the Seoul International School had one day to get set up, but since the school already used Google Classroom and practices one-to-one teaching, the set-up effort was minor. For group discussions with her older students, Grant says Zoom is better.

The school is functioning rather traditionally, with live teaching via Google Meets during four 80-minute periods per day, meeting every other day. Grant can teach from anywhere, but prefers to go to the school, where nurses check faculty temperatures when they arrive.

“The most successful learning environments seem to find the balance between technical innovation and personal support.”

BLOG ON LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT

https://bold.expert/ready-or-not-online-teaching-is-here/
Students are keeping up with their work and seem just as motivated as before, Grant reports, but adds that they’re starting to get sick of online learning. “They miss coming to school for the peer interaction. Many of them haven’t left their apartments for weeks,” she says. At this writing, South Korea plans to re-open its schools on April 6, but this is a deadline that has already been pushed back twice.

And while her students seem to be doing fine online, Grant says she doesn’t like the current regime much. “Most of the joy I get out of teaching is from the kids, and the bonds we create, and the stories we share, and that isn’t really happening online,” she admits. For all the creative methods of remote learning available, teaching is still a profession that is based on personal contact. The most successful learning environments seem to find the balance between technical innovation and personal support. The current situation is an opportunity for teachers and e-learning professionals to test the boundaries of what is possible without the personal contact.

“The current situation is an opportunity for teachers and e-learning professionals to test the boundaries of what is possible without the personal contact.”

Over the weeks to come, BOLD will report regularly from the educational frontlines, sharing further experiences from teachers and schools around the world as they come to terms with the challenges of teaching and learning under COVID-19 constraints.

This article was published on BOLD, the Blog on Learning and Development. If you would like to share it with others, please do not use this PDF but instead link to the original post at https://bold.expert/ready-or-not-online-teaching-is-here/.