

Teaching and Assessing During Distance Learning via the COVID-19 School Shutdown is an Opportunity to Become Creative

- *Text of Rick Wormeli's Opening Comments for Zoom Assessment and Grading Session held March 26, 2020. For more conversation, contact Rick at rick@rickwormeli.onmicrosoft.com. The link for the archive of the Zoom session is available under the far right tab of www.rickwormeli.com, under, "Multimedia."*

Necessity is the mother of invention. This is the time to reinvent one's approach, stripping away complacent, automatic pilot practices, and looking deeply at what really works in teaching – Is it resonant and meaningful to students, and does it result in lasting learning? Let's see our call to be so innovative right now, not as a burden to bear, but as a wellspring from which we draw rich ideas and new perspectives for student learning – and meaningful teaching.

We can invite students into the teaching-learning dynamo, for example, asking them to plan/deliver some lessons themselves (Really, they can often run circles around us with their tech prowess, and they're looking for a way to be active and contribute!). We can invite them to think of different ways to assess the same standard, as long as we're focused on accurate evidence of proficiency, not compliance that they followed a format, and they can suggest meaningful writing topics and activities that more closely reflect their lives and culture, and would still enable them demonstrate proficiencies.

We can look on-line for how other teachers who teach the same things we do and borrow from them, or outright ask students to watch them. We can consider how we can let students use their physical bodies to represent abstract or even not-so-abstract ideas more concretely: finger plays to demonstrate chromosome division during mitosis, arms movements to demonstrate geometric concepts, asking students to touch one wall of the room they're in and yelling, "a," then walking to the opposite wall and touching it, yelling "lot," then asking them to notice all the space in between those two words so as to remind them that "a lot" is really two words, not one. They can use their bodies plus three or four items found around the house to demonstrate transition and metamorphosis, they can

build a physical or virtual models with at least one moving piece to demonstrate the abstract ideas of Constitutional Monarchy or honor. They can create a podcast debate between historical figures, a series of postcard or Instagram reflections from specific characters in their novels. They see the power of verbs by conducting conversations without using them and seeing how hard it is. This is the chance to get truly excited about the possibility in learning and assessment.

Truly, though, we can all feel a bit out of our depth, out of control of what's happening. Students feel this keenly even w/out COVID19 and sheltering in place, so move classes closer toward this creative, modified democracy, turning over leadership of the class – and in some connected curriculum ideas so things are relevant - to your students. With this, they feel like they matter. Sitting and receiving all day in an already anxious 24-7 exacerbates depression and divestment.

Innovating our lessons and assessments for remote learning is a great opportunity to revisit our core values as teachers and look at how we manifest them weekly. What do we really believe about the way students best learn? Write these operational tenets down, discuss them with colleagues, as you can. Realize, that there's nothing about distance learning that says we give up all we know about effective teaching. When we sacrifice principles, we feel lost ourselves, we succumb, losing steam in our own efforts. If we're principled first, actionable second, we fight just a little harder, last a little longer, as we confront the creative challenges ahead.

Some educators have let their own creativity atrophy over the years, though, with some just going through the motions of last year with their current students. When they weren't looking, they fell into a comforting and familiar pattern, though it be a rut. They start claiming that there is only one way to assess something when really there are a dozen. A student with special needs who can't learn or assess with a given technique will just have to suck it up because there are no other options to get at the same learning – when really there are wonderful ways to do it.

Let's take time as we can to widen our repertoire and feed our own intellectual selves. It goes back to the, "If all I have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail" thinking we want to avoid. I did an article with specific

suggestions on how to do that, and it's available for free in the articles section of my website.

Humor is deeply connective, and wow, it releases the dopamine we need to stay attentive and actually invest in what we're doing. Seriously, put occasionally bizarre, humorous, "punny," satirical, and funny elements into the online learning and assessment experiences: Instead of asking students to determine the carrying capacity of a swimming pool, ask them to figure out how many boxes of chocolate pudding you'd need to fill it up, and what kind of fun games you could play with a pool full of chocolate pudding.

At the end of homework or assessment questions on content, throw in a question about something completely unrelated, but interesting to answer. For example, after several math problems ask, "For what do you have more use in your life: parallel or perpendicular lines?" "Describe a time when you laughed so hard that what you were drinking at the time came out of your nose."

Teach while holding an umbrella over your head, as if it were raining only on you. Don't say anything about it. If a student comments on why you're holding it indoors and it's not raining, tell him that in your reality it is raining and that you'd kindly like him to be careful where he walks as he is splashing through puddles in his own home right and left. Occasionally stick out a hand, palm up, to see if it's still raining. There's a child-like playfulness here that catches students unaware and invites imagination.

If remote learning is not available for some students, take picture of yourself holding a funny and encouraging sign made uniquely for a particular student, and send it through the Postal Service to the student's home. Appear outside the front windows of their homes in a crazy costume and offer a personal message of connection and encouragement.

Let's forgive, too, all of our imperfections, impatience, less effective lessons/interactions that come. These are normal, reasonable things that will improve over time. In any hard change, it's a process, not an event, so let it be a progression, and not despair over steps that were smaller than we thought they would be or the times stumble down blind alleys. Let's just be sure, though, to invite students to walk the path with us, and maybe even lead the way.

Just as forest fire can bring new and unprecedented growth to places that were over-grown and strangling all new life, this is opportunity here to renew ourselves, add colors to our palette, find vitality where it may have waned. And wow, education needs life right now, so run with it.

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