Remote Learning is Here to Stay

Ie May Freeman[1], Ed.D. & HeeKap Lee[2], Ph.D.

Abstract

The novel coronavirus or COVID-19 pandemic has forced many school districts around the United States to shutter at an immediate notice in March of 2020. Public, charter, and private elementary, and secondary school students have been affected in not meeting face to face with a teacher on record. Remote learning is the new teaching approach that school districts have taken during the pandemic occurrence. This type of learning has allowed the opportunity for students to learn from home and with accountability. There are positive effects and limitations of remote learning that will be addressed in the article. The knowledge about remote learning will help prepare teachers, paraprofessionals, district officials, administrators, and university credential programs of how to best understand and implement remote learning in the 21st century.

Key words: remote learning, asynchronous, synchronous, COVID-19, coronavirus, distance learning

History of Remote Learning

Remote learning dates back to 1728 (Levander & Decehrney, 2020). It is different to that of distance learning. Remote learning is a method of study where students and teachers do not meet in a classroom. Learning can take place through learning management systems such as Google Classrooms. It can also include real time interaction with the teacher on record. Distance learning is a method of study where students and teachers do not meet face to face in a classroom. Instead, they use other means of communication to have classes. This could be in the form of enrichment activities and the review of previously taught concepts. Grades are not as emphasized than in remote learning.

Levander and Decherney (2020) reported in 1728 that Caleb Phillips taught shorthand to students from any part of the United States by receiving letters. About 145 years after Phillip's instruction, the first correspondence school called the Society to Encourage Studies at Home was founded by Eliot Ticknor (Levander & Decherney, 2020). The society's main focus was to help women teach other women by mail because they were not allowed to attend schools due to their gender (Levander & Decherney, 2020). Since its inception women were able to learn from home subjects like science, history, and literature. During these planned courses, women were able to fully engage and interact with faculty members through constant communication (Levander &Decherney, 2020).

The Society to Encourage Studies at Home paved the way for more universities to adopt correspondence pedagogy. Universities such as Penn State and the University of Iowa began offering radio classes for credit (Levander & Decherney, 2020). Eventually, television courses were offered for credit at The University of Houston in the 1920s (Levander & Decherney, 2020). The shift from radio and television has pivoted to computers due to the advancement in technology over time. Many universities, elementary, and high schools in the United States are now offering courses for credit through the use of computers in an online setting due to high-speed Internet connectivity (Bower et al., 2015).

Characteristics of Remote Learning

Remote learning is where students are instructed by a teacher at the convenience of one's home. Technology is essential and required for remote learning to take place. The use of a personal computer, laptop, smartphone, tablet, and Wi-Fi service is essential for remote learning to take place (Bower et al., 2015).

Information presented by the teacher is usually transmitted in multiple ways. This can include Padlet, Google Classroom, email, video conferencing on Zoom platforms, Flipgrid, Google Hangout, Google Docs, or audio podcasts. Remote learning does not require any type of physical connection (White et al., 2010).

[1] Azusa Pacific University (Azusa, CA)
[2] Azusa Pacific University (Azusa, CA)

The information relayed by the teacher to students includes asking and answering questions, adding comments during class discussion, and instructing students (White et al, 2010).

In 2019, the novel coronavirus or COVID-19 pandemic started in Wuhan, China, and spread to all parts of the world (CDC, 2020). Practicing social distancing by standing six feet apart from another person was needed to slow down the spread of this highly contagious disease (CDC, 2020). Due to the coronavirus disease, schools and universities were forced to immediately shut down for the remainder of the school year (Kohli & Blume, 2020). Over 104,000 schools were closed and over 47.9 million students were affected due to the coronavirus pandemic in America (Fishbane & Tomer, 2020). Students found themselves no longer attending a traditional school setting due to the shelter-in-place order (Kohli & Blume, 2020). Academic instruction quickly shifted to remote learning where teachers did not have the luxury of time to prepare (Levander & Decherney, 2020). Teachers had to take on the exceptionally large challenge of online learning for about 6.1 million K-12th grade students in California (Kohli & Blume, 2020).

Remote learning became ubiquitous in a short matter of time because of COVID-19. At first, many teachers were reluctant to use technological tools like Zoom, Skype, and Google Hangout to teach students in a remote environment (Levander & Decherney, 2020). Eventually, teachers worked on scheduling Zoom meetings and conference calls with students as they learned at the convenience of their room, kitchen, living room, or small workspace (Levander & Decherney, 2020).

Remote learning can be approached in two ways: synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous learning is where students learn in real-time from a teacher (Bower et al., 2015). This may include attending lessons, lectures, and workshops that are taught live at an appointed time and day. School districts like Riverside and Corona-Norco Unified in California are establishing accountability for students and teachers during remote learning. Due to COVID-19 remote learning teachers are responsible for keeping track of student attendance. Teachers are asked to teach instruction that is aligned to Common Core State Standards. They are responsible for providing and grading student homework in a timely manner. Lastly, the teacher's delivery method can include direct online instruction that is provided per week. Online instruction can be in the form of Math, English Language Arts, Science, History, and P.E. Students can have access to academic activities during remote learning as provided by the teacher.

The second type of remote learning is asynchronous learning. Asynchronous learning is where students log on at any time and learn from discussion boards, download documents, read articles, respond to messages sent by cohorts, and teachers (Hrastinski, 2008). Students can learn at their own pace without the teacher's real-time assistance (Hrastinski, 2008). Asynchronous learning allows students to spend more time learning on their own and refining their work before submission to the instructor (Hrastinski, 2008).

Effectiveness of Remote Learning

In order to implement an effective remote learning, two supporting systems should be seriously considered: parental and environmental supports.

Parental support

Curtis and Werth (2015) believe that for remote learning to be effective, there needs to be a caring community involved. The stakeholders involved are not only teachers and site administrators, but parents as well. Parents can contribute to making remote learning effective by guiding, encouraging, and supporting their child during this process (Curtis & Welch, 2015). This includes providing extra support on assignments, homework, tasks, projects, reading questions, and assessments. Parents can also support their child by having them log into Google Classroom, Google Meets, Zoom meetings, Skype, or another technology application. They can also discuss with the teacher if they are having problems logging in online or if they are unable to attend due to personal issues. This helps to set a good form of communication in a remote learning environment when face to face contact is not an option. Parents can assist by making sure that their child is fed breakfast before remote learning takes place. Medina (2014) believes that when students dietary needs are provided for, they are ready and willing to learn.

Additionally, parents can monitor that their child is wearing proper classroom attire. This helps the student and parent know that remote learning is to be taken seriously and not lightly. Remote learning is to be treated like they are in class even though they are learning from home. Parents can also support their children by providing a proper place to sit instead of a bed or mattress.

Finally, they can also help their child get ready by making sure that all the materials are provided before remote learning takes place. This could be but not limited to a pencil, marker, whiteboard, textbook, calculator, paper, ruler, crayon, headphones, or a homework packet.

What can parents expect from teachers during remote learning? Parents can depend that their teachers will build meaningful connections with their children. This means calling on their child's name to answer a question during remote learning, providing verbal feedback, written feedback, and praise as appropriate. Parents can also trust that teachers will plan lessons that are aligned to Common Core State Standards. And they can expect that the content covered such as English Language Arts and Math is age-appropriate for remote learning instruction.

Parents can also anticipate that there will be some type of check-ins with the teacher. They can ask questions or seek clarification of assignments, homework, or projects through applications such as Remind, Class DoJo, or Bloomz. The questions posed to teachers should be answered back promptly in order to ensure open communication. For example, Corona-Norco and Riverside Unified School District in California has a turnaround time policy where teachers usually respond back in one business day. Parents can also expect that the teacher will support English Learners, students with Special Needs, gifted, and at-risk students. Parents can also count on teachers to provide activities for their children to complete on a daily basis. This could be videotaping a Flipgrid presentation for a Book Box and uploading it for the teacher and classmates to view and comment on. Activities could also be to complete math worksheets individually. And completing weekly readings online. Lastly, parents can also count on teachers to monitor their child's progress, grades, homework packets, participation, and online attendance.

Environmental support

For the remote learning experience to be effective, students should adhere to a few protocols as set forth by the teacher on record. The first is to be camera ready. Students should position themselves in a way that allows their faces to be seen by the teacher and all classmates. The second way for the online experience to be effective is preparation. Coming prepared to attend class remotely allows students to feel ready to go. This means having materials, resources, supplies, and a speaker that is audible is important to ensure a successful learning experience. To avoid distractions there should be no food or drink present. Eating breakfast or lunch should be kept for another time.

Another way to make remote learning a more effective experience is to mute the cell phone, laptop, iPad, or computer device. The importance of muting the microphone allows background noise to not interfere with the teacher's instructional time. Additionally, being punctual allows every minute of learning to take place. Coming in late to remote learning reduces the amount of potential learning. It is also important to use kind and respectful words during the remote learning environment. The use of appropriate language by students helps to foster a positive experience. Lastly, having no toys around to play with during remote learning for elementary school students is important. This will reduce the amount of distraction while learning.

Limitations of Remote Learning

What are students saying about remote synchronous learning due to COVID-19? Goldstein (2020) reported that there has been a great shift among students in coping with remote learning. Many students miss going back to the traditional school to be with their classmates, teachers, having lunch in the cafeteria, and participating in after school or sport activities (Goldstein, 2020). Bower et al. (2015) argue that students relish the face-to-face interaction and socialization with their classmates and teacher that cannot be found in remote learning. Gray and DiLoreto (2016) assert that students do not feel a sense of connection to their teachers and peers in a remote learning environment.

Lack of Technology

There are several limitations students and families face with remote learning during COVID-19. According to Goldstein (2020), many students do not have a laptop computer at home in order to attend remote online sessions. To meet this need, school districts have come up with ways to provide laptops for students. For example, Springfield Public Schools in Massachusetts have distributed over 9,000 laptops to Kindergarten through 12th-grade disadvantaged students during COVID-19 (Bourne, 2020). In California, over 4,000 Chromebooks were generously donated by Google to rural students (Johnson, 2020). In Idaho, over 25,000 students will be provided a personal laptop or iPad from the Boise School District due to school closures and a move to remote learning (Lycklama, 2020). In Seattle, Amazon donated over 8,200 laptops for families of students who do not have a computer needed for remote learning due to the pandemic (Romano, 2020).

Teachers also need to consider the issue the digital divide. When implementing remote learning there is the lack of access to internet service (Johnson, 2020). According to Fishbane and Tomer (2020) around 6.8% Black and 3.4% Hispanic households do not have in-home broadband. Communities of color and low-income communities have had a challenge to connect at home (Fishbane& Tomer, 2020). To ensure that this is not an issue, Google provided free Wi-Fi service to over 1,000,000 rural households in California for three months during the coronavirus pandemic (Johnson, 2020). The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has also issued the Keep Americans Connected Pledge where internet service providers provide Wi-Fi hotspots who cannot afford to pay for their bills (Fishbane & Tomer, 2020).

Once connected to the internet, there are a few more limitations. Students are finding it unreliable when connecting from a Wi-Fi hot spot (Goldstein, 2020). Teachers are also finding technology cutting in and out due to connectivity issues at home. When a Zoom meeting kicks out a teacher unexpectedly it can lead to minimal learning. Students are left to wait for the teacher to get back in. The time spent trying to get back slows down the rate of learning at a regular pace.

Another limitation is screen space. Not all students can see what the teacher is trying to show students on their computer camera because the words can be too small or light on paper. This can lead to students feeling left behind and frustrated in trying to figure out what the teacher is trying to convey in print.

Lack of Student Engagement

Coupled with the technical challenges, the lack of student engagement is another problem with remote learning. Students can get easily distracted from their home surroundings and not focus on the teacher's direction (Goldstein, 2020). This means that students are not able to pay attention given the environmental noise from the car honking, dog barking, cell phone ringing, siblings talking on the cell phone, or the television in the background. There could be times where students do not sit, focus, and pay attention to the teacher during remote learning. They can walk around and leave their seat due to the lack of interest in learning. These are some problems that teachers can encounter in a remote learning environment where not all students are fully engaged.

Another issue is that students with Special Needs, at-risk, or English Learners are struggling to understand the concepts and assignments taught by remote learning (Goldstein, 2020). At times, students find it difficult keeping up with the teacher's lecture, ask questions, and provide one on one assistance due to remote learning (Goldstein, 2020). This is because the teacher facilitates the discussion or lecture for a limited amount of time. It makes remote learning a challenge to answer all student's questions and work with those who are struggling in a remote setting. Fishbane and Tomer (2020) argue that the students who were already vulnerable to falling behind in school will continue to face the same challenges in order to keep pace. Due to the inability to complete assignments at home over 12 million students or 15% are shortchanged of the remote learning experience (Fishbane & Tomer, 2020).

Trauma-informed remote learning strategies

The novel coronavirus or COVID-19 pandemic has forced many school districts around United States to shutter at an immediate notice in March of 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted to the whole areas of our lives including schools and education contexts. How do teachers respond to students effectively in the COVID-19 pandemic?

As the COVID-19 pandemic upended the whole society, teachers need to establish trauma-informed practices to support students' remote learning effectively. Here in this section, the authors address three key practices that teachers may use in their remote educational settings.

First, set up a welcoming remote classroom. Trauma can create intense feelings of unpredictability that threaten students' sense of physical and psychological safety. Therefore, teachers need to help students minimize feelings of unpredictability by creating safe welcoming activities during the remote learning in which students feel safe and supportive and trusting relationships.

Second, utilizing technology meaningfully and productively. Kolb (2017) suggests the triple E framework which is a validated research-informed tool to assess how effectively the technology and instructional strategies around the technology is helping. She identifies three essential components to integrate technology meaningfully when design lessons into classrooms which are engagement, enhancement and extension. The first component is engagement. Teachers should choose apps and technology tools that bring students into collaboration with others.

The second one is enhancement, meaning that in order to assure that technology is enhancing learning, teachers need to purposefully design strategies to help connect the content learning to the creation software. The final component is extension. Technology should help bridge real-world learning with the classroom curriculum, by taking students into direct contact with the world outside their walls (Kolb, 2017).

Lastly, building hope and embracing resilient mindset would be another critical factor to consider. Experiencing trauma might make student feel powerless. Teachers can offer a different narrative and minimize barriers to learning by trading some of more rigid expectations for students' voice and share decision making through which teachers foster students' positive and resilient mindset. When teachers believe students are competent, they tend to perform better, while teachers believe students have deficit, they tend to perform more poorly.

Conclusion

Remote learning has impacted millions of Kindergarteners to 12th graders around the United States and the entire world. It has become ubiquitous. The need to maintain social distancing because of the novel coronavirus has led to this occurrence at the time this article was written. Much can be learned from the practice of remote learning as there are limitations and positive outcomes that can come about as this article addresses. It has delivered a learning platform that provides students a way to learn concepts from a teacher in a non-traditional setting. Administrators, district personnel, students, parents, and primary care-takers can take this unprecedented change and adjust to remote learning. This educational discovery under crisis conditions can pave the way for a new era of instruction that requires less presence in a traditional classroom and more emphasis on distance instruction. Transformational change in education has arrived and is here to stay.

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