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## Dos & Don'ts of Teaching in a COVID-19 Environment

By **Larry Ferlazzo** on August 4, 2020 11:11 AM

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*(This is the first post in a three-part series.)*

The new question-of-the-week is:

*Using the framework of "Dos and Don'ts," what would you list as the dos and don'ts of teaching in a COVID-19 environment?*

I published over 60 posts in the spring supporting educators dealing with emergency remote teaching and, during August and September, will be posting a similar "blitz" of responses to questions many of us teachers have on our minds these days.

You can see them all at **School Closures & the Coronavirus Crisis**.

Today, Emily Golightly, Guadalupe Carrasco Cardona, Amy Klein*,* and Ann Stiltner share their recommendations.

**Top 10 list of quarantine teaching dos and don'ts**

*Emily Golightly has taught for the past 16 years in North Carolina, serving as a classroom teacher in grades K-3, a reading specialist, an ESL teacher, and most recently, a media coordinator of a K-5 library. She is passionate about literacy and has served on her local and state-level reading associations. She is also a member of the North Carolina English Learner Advisory Council. In her free time, she enjoys reading, baking, crocheting, and playing board games with her family:*

**DO:**

1. **Breathe.** Give yourself permission to grieve the loss of that face-to-face time, but also look for the positives in the situation. I have gotten to know some of my students better through quarantine, because as an itinerant ESL teacher traveling to multiple schools, I didn't get to see them as regularly during a normal week as I did during quarantine. I formed bonds with students and parents that may not have developed as fully without this extra time. Additionally, using these virtual meets has given me another option for connecting with students when I am traveling from school to school, so this experience could even change the way you schedule classes, now that we have seen the possibilities and positives of the experience. I will definitely be keeping the good elements of this in my teaching repertoire, even when we return to "normal" life again.

2. **Have fun!** Gamify your learning where possible. I love using Kahoot! to make our class meetings fun and exciting but also enjoy other low-tech options, like scavenger hunts, I Spy, and "Spaceman" (like "Hangman" but with an astronaut and spaceship). I use these games to teach and review vocabulary, get students talking, and just to put a smile on their faces. Games also lower students' affective filters, creating an environment where their brains are more likely to retain the information than they would have in a higher-stress environment.

3. **Carve out a little time for professional development.** What better time than now to learn how to use a new tool, familiarize yourself with something you've been meaning to learn, and better your craft? Use this gift of time to improve yourself if you are able to fit it into your schedule. (I realize this is aspirational, so there's no judgment if you are a mama with a toddler just trying to survive the day, either. We are all experiencing this quarantine differently, so be gentle with yourself.)

4. **Use tools that you are already comfortable using** and that your students were already using in the classroom, where possible. Familiar tools will be easier to implement, causing you, your students, and their families less stress in the long run. New tools are great, but it can be challenging to introduce new techniques in a virtual environment.

5. **If you HAVE to introduce new content or new tools, creating a Screencastify video** (or other screencasting tool) is a great way to walk students and their families through the process, step by step. I know it's tempting to record only your voice and not your face in these videos, but fight that urge and record video, not just audio. Trust me. The kids love seeing your face, as it gives them a sense of familiarity in a weird, frightening time, and lets them know that you are truly there for them.

6. **Use activities that require interaction** (Flipgrid, Padlet, Seesaw, etc.). The activities that I had the most participation with all included an interactive element, and my students craved that interaction more than the equivalent of a "digital worksheet." It helps them feel

connected to their classmates and to their teachers.

7. **Set boundaries.** As much as you love your students, there needs to be a firm cutoff time so you can enjoy your own family and provide some time for self-care. (This is easier said than done, I know, but I struggled with this and am working to ensure that I do not fall into the same trap again if we are teaching and learning remotely in the fall, both for my sanity and my family.)

8. **Engage with students via live chats** (Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts, etc.) as often as possible. That face time is more valuable than any activity or lesson you assign and is critical for their social-emotional health as well.

9. **Work with other teachers to schedule your live chats.** If not, your students may be forced to choose one teacher over another, and you may have less interaction and engagement in your chats due to less participation. BONUS: Schedule chats WITH these teachers. You can do fun activities together, it is collaboration and co-teaching and shows the students how much both teachers care about them!

10. **Be patient with yourself and your students.** We are all dealing with unique challenges that come from teaching and learning at home and we are giving the best we have to give, which can vary from day to day.

**DON'T:**

1. **Forget the power of sunshine!** After several weeks of sitting at my kitchen table, I decided to move to my back deck and found that I felt much happier being able to hear the birds, enjoy the fresh air, and have a little change of scenery while I worked. I found that my students actually enjoyed this, too, and I encouraged them to work outside if they had a space to do so as well.

2. **Sit in front of your screen for too long.** I found in the beginning of quarantine, I was actually having back problems from sitting in front of my laptop all day. During my normal week, I was up and down often, rarely sitting, and often up and walking to go pick up students from various classrooms, visit teachers to discuss student needs, etc. In quarantine, all of my work has been based on a screen, so I found myself sitting much more than ever before and realized that I had to be intentional about walking away from my screen if my back was going to survive this!

3. **Forget to get physical activity and do the things you love doing.** It is important to get fresh air, take breaks to stretch, call a friend, or play with your dog. Teachers are dedicated by nature, but we have to care for ourselves if we are going to have the strength and energy to care for others.

4. **Judge too harshly if a student or family struggles to complete your assignments remotely.** Everyone has different challenges they are facing through this pandemic, and our care and understanding go a LONG way in helping students feel supported. Whenever I called home to check on students who were not completing tasks, I always asked them about how they were doing, if they were OK, if they needed anything, and how their family was doing, before we ever discussed anything academic. I know it's frustrating to work hard to provide learning opportunities and then see a student not doing the work (or multiple students!), but the social-emotional piece is just as important, if not more important, than the academic piece, and we have to remember both.

5. **Forget about families who may have limited/no access to technology or reliable internet.** Some families need packets, and that's OK. It's important to try and make the packet work as purposeful as the digital work so this does not unintentionally create disparities for students.

6. **Try to implement a lot of new technologies virtually**. It is MUCH easier to implement things that students have already been using, where possible. In some instances, this is unavoidable, but I think this makes a great case for training students on a variety of tech tools early in the school year, ensuring that if we encounter a situation like this again, they are trained and know what to do when they have to learn from home.

7. **Forget about copyright laws!** Some publishers have loosened guidelines during this time, but you are responsible for making sure that you give credit where credit is due. We want to model this habit for our students so they learn to give credit appropriately as well.

8. **Compare yourself with other teachers.** Social media has the potential to make people feel "less than" when they see friends and colleagues doing amazing things. Remember that YOU are amazing, too, and that social media is everyone's "highlight reel." You know your students and their needs best. Keep doing what you know is best for your kids, and if you see something you like, feel free to try it, but please don't feel compelled or pressured to follow every fad you see on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram because you think it will make you look like a "good teacher." You are enough for your students.

will make you look like a "good teacher." You are enough for your students.

9. **Overload your students with lots of busy work**, particularly students who may be caring for other siblings or family members, or younger students who may have limited home supports. This only serves to widen the gap between them and their privileged peers.

10. **Drive yourself crazy with the "what-if's!"** What will next year look like? What will I need to do about my students who are falling behind? What if my students get sick? What will happen if I get sick? We have enough to do without worrying about tomorrow. Tomorrow will be here soon enough. (I am reminding myself of this as I am typing it, because I am naturally a worrier!) Try to enjoy today and find the things that bring you joy throughout the day. I found that simple things like just getting dressed made a big difference in my day. It was a signal to my brain that I was "going to work," even though I was sitting on my couch or in my dining room. Our family got into the habit of enjoying a family breakfast each morning, less rushed than our normal school days. We found that there were actually many joys in our quarantine schedule and that it helped us appreciate the little things that our busyness had overshadowed. I am not trying to say that quarantine teaching has been easy, or that I prefer it to seeing my students and colleagues face-to-face, but I am working hard to find the joy in small moments, and that is a gift in itself.
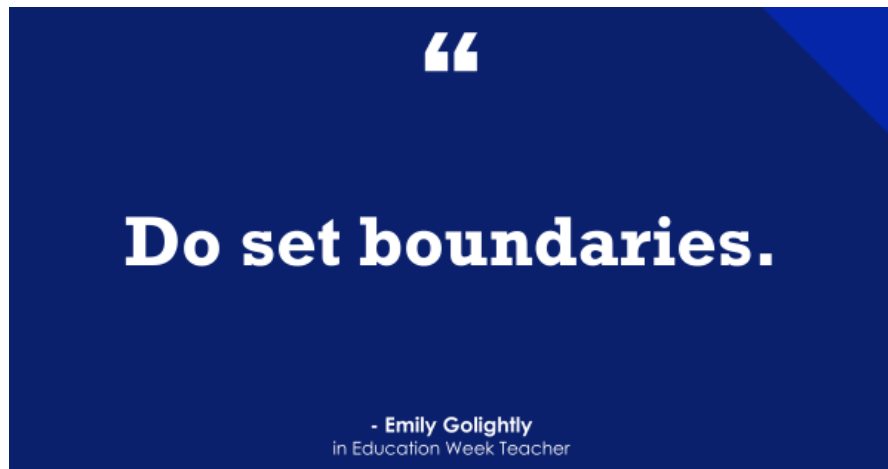


**Flexibility**

*Guadalupe Carrasco Cardona is an ethnic-studies activist and organizer from East Los Angeles who has been a high school teacher for 20 years. She is proud of her work as a facilitator of re-membering the self through auto-ethnography and counter-narrative:*

Do be flexible with due dates and accepting of work that is late. Don't forget that some students work, assist their parents with sibling care, have contracted COVID-19 or know someone who has, may have COVID-connected job losses in their families, may be sharing space with lots of individuals, and might lack the resources they need.

Do remind students to social distance and to take precautions. Don't allow a seemingly safe and open economy to let our guards down and to forget that people are still contracting and dying from COVID-19.

Do use tools like YouTube, Screen-cast-omatic, FlipGrid, and your smartphone to name a few to be innovative with your lessons and recordings. Don't rely on in-person virtual meetings like Zoom alone; there are asynchronous tools that can help bring teachers to students 24/7.

Do remember that you cannot be replaced as the best educator for our students. Don't forget that this is a  pandemic, and we must all do our best to survive and thrive until it becomes a thing of history.

**that is late.**

- Guadalupe Carrasco Cardona
in Education Week Teacher

**"Simple is better"**

*In classrooms regular, special needs, intervention, and now as school librarian at St. Croix Falls Elementary School in rural Wisconsin, Amy Klein has taught every grade. A national-board-certified master teacher in early-childhood and middle-level literacy, she holds degrees in English, special education, and reading and has been pushing books on students, her husband, and her own four children for the past 22 years:*

In a matter of weeks last March, students and instructors at all levels found themselves in a whole new world. My family quickly decluttered work spaces, logged in, and tried to wrap our heads around the idea of distance learning. A few weeks into the "new normal," I posed this question to my independent, studious college-aged daughters, who rather than living their collegiate dreams at Big 10 University, had suddenly found themselves participating in Zoomed lectures at a kitchen table at home. Their advice, based on their experience, seems to apply—given a device and internet connection—to most educational settings as well.

DON'T:

- Don't make all learning screen-based.
- Don't toss out new platforms or digital tools without support.
- Don't assign more work than usual to take the place of being in school.

Compared with in-person learning, this virtual experience was at first frustrating, at times comical, and in the end exhausting. To the true value of their learning, my girls' response was, "Sure. We learned what instructors gave us." But it wasn't great. Hundreds of students listening to long recorded lecture. Classes in Zoom with halting, awkward discussions. Instructors opting to shorten classes because of discomfort with the platform. I experienced this myself on a 1st grade level that included several closeups of kids' eyeballs, everyone's furry or scaly pet, and kids that just walked away from the screen. Barely adequate might be the descriptor.

But the distance learning experiment is over. Going forward into a full school year where learning may depend on the better-than-adequate in whatever configuration of school must attempt, we'll need to prepare with a basics philosophy in mind.

DO:

- Simple is better. Less is more.
- Promote routine, systematized work.
- Smaller is better for virtual discussions.
- Include 1:1 learning time.
- Stay as individual as possible with feedback.
- Be creative with ways to learn that aren't necessarily digital.
- Include some means for reflection to take place, perhaps with a choice of modalities (i.e., spoken, written, or digital).

In the elementary school where I'm the librarian, we've been talking about the best activities, the best lessons, the best routines that will help support the best learning in an adaptable learning environment. Focusing on a few essential principles and pairing those principles with a small set of tools directed at small groups of students at a time hopefully will allow learning that is more than just adequate.

**"**

**Simple is better.
Less is more.**

**"Don't make assumptions ..."**

*Ann Stiltner is a high school special education teacher in Connecticut. She writes the blog* **from Room A212** *.Follow her on Twitter @fromrooma212:*

E-learning. Distance learning. Virtual learning. No matter what you call it, the face of education has changed due to the coronavirus pandemic. This summer provides an opportunity for teachers to reflect on what worked and what didn't last spring and how to plan going forward with the reality that remote learning may be a part of the 2020-21 school year. Here are some dos and don'ts for teaching virtually in this COVID-19 environment.

**Don't** make assumptions about which students will do well in remote learning and which ones will struggle. Your students will surprise you. I made the mistake last spring of trying to predict which students would thrive with distance learning and which ones would be unsuccessful. I was totally wrong. You won't be able to tell ahead of time.

**Do** create a sense of community and rapport with your online classes. Set aside time to connect with your students and have fun. YouTube has helpful videos demonstrating games you can play with young people on Zoom. Schedule Zoom or Google Meet calls with the class to build connections and to check on the social-emotional needs of your students. Incorporate rewards and positive- behavior supports to your remote environment. Check online for distance learning/ e-learning incentive ideas.

**Don't** think you know why students are not engaging in distance learning. There are many reasons why students don't participate. Often students don't know why they are disengaged or how to express it. Sometimes they are protecting their family's privacy. Take time to reflect and develop some theories. Then, collaborate with colleagues to test out your theories to get a fuller picture of their disengagement and brainstorm solutions.

**Do** ask students what they need and how they are doing. Pay attention to which remote lessons work and engage students. Ask often for feedback. Listen to how they are coping and what is going on in their lives. Be aware of any changes in engagement. For some students, the signal might be more contact and reaching out to you, and for others it might be less.

**Don't** design lessons with multiple steps and new technologies students have not had practice using. Often, if things do not go as planned, students struggle to solve problems on their own. For many students, their problem-solving skills are limited and still developing. Assign technologies and websites for virtual learning with which students have had previous experience. Avoid steep learning curves and keep technology simple and straightforward.

**Do** reply as soon as you can to students when they have questions or concerns during distance learning. I found last spring many of my students gave up on remote lessons if I didn't respond to their questions right away. I learned to check Google Classroom and my email vigilantly when I was on the clock. I also made sure students had several different ways to reach me including a Google Voice number.

**Don't** expect to easily repurpose in-person lessons successfully to online formats without adjustments and trial and error. Covering curriculum like before is not realistic. This requires rethinking content, replanning tried-and-true units, and collaborating with colleagues to identify new directions and possibilities.

**Do** reach out to parents and families early to set up effective lines of communication. Many times this last spring I relied on my parents to give me feedback on students' progress and to support completing assignments. I was thankful I had created positive relationships with parents early before switching to distance learning.

**Don't** be afraid to change things if they are not working. We are all in uncharted territory. It is better to change for a thoughtful reason in order to improve learning outcomes for our students than to not change because we are concerned how we will be judged.

**Do** take time to support your colleagues and take care of yourself. As much as you can, set limits on your online availability. Make use of email auto-reply after hours to let students and parents know when you will be able to get back to them. Don't be afraid to share with parents and older students what you have going on in your own life. Try, as much as possible, to approach this year with a growth mindset!

# Don't be afraid to change things if they are not working.

- Ann Stiltner
in Education Week Teacher
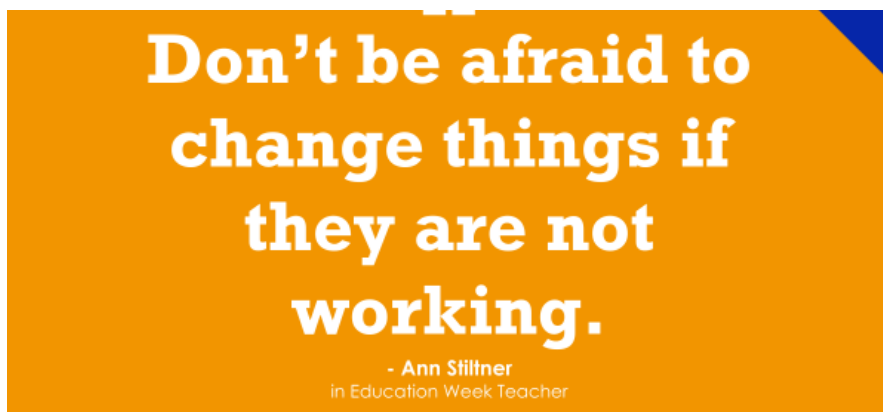
Thanks to Emily, Guadalupe, Amy, and Ann for their contributions!

Please feel free to leave a comment with your reactions to the topic or directly to anything that has been said in this post.

Consider contributing a question to be answered in a future post. You can send one to me at **lferlazzo@epe.org**. When you send it in, let me know if I can use your real name if it's selected or if you'd prefer remaining anonymous and have a pseudonym in mind.

You can also contact me on Twitter at **@Larryferlazzo**.

Education Week has published a collection of posts from this blog, along with new material, in an e-book form. It's titled **Classroom Management Q&As: Expert Strategies for Teaching**.

*Just a reminder; you can subscribe and receive updates from this blog via **email** or **RSS Reader.** And if you missed any of the highlights from the first eight years of this blog, you can see a categorized list below. The list doesn't include ones from this current year, but you can find those by clicking on the "answers" category found in the sidebar.*

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