

Chapter 11

Crystallizing Moments: Teacher–Student Interaction and Engagement in Online Primary Grades Education

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced K-12 teachers to think differently about their teaching methods. Primary grade teachers must especially consider how to make online learning engaging, motivating, and as hands-on and developmentally appropriate as possible for young learners. This chapter provides insight into purposely created and child-centered crystallizing moments, in which research-based strategies can enhance teacher-student interaction and engagement. Examples from real-world teaching practice are included.

INTRODUCTION

As the central theme of this book stresses, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced K-12 teachers to think differently about their teaching methods. Primary grades teachers, students, and parents have faced an especially rough transition (Rasmitadila et al., 2020) because of a mismatch between typical online education methods and the need for developmentally appropriate and hands-on learning for young learners. Simultaneously, twenty-first century learning and skills, such as communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking, are more critical now than ever before (Guo & Woulfin, 2016). Curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Beebe et al., 2010) are crucial concerns when transitioning to online learning models. Teachers who have suddenly switched to online modalities may lack knowledge regarding

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best practices for online teaching, especially student engagement. Teachers may also lack the confidence in their ability to effectively communicate, demonstrate, and act creatively with their students through an online platform. A new and mindful approach to helping these teachers move forward is necessary. Educators encounter challenges with redesigning curriculum to be compatible and effective online. One key to enhancing teacher-student interaction and engagement in online primary grades classrooms is the concept of *Crystallizing Moments* (Gardner, 1991; Murphy, 2016), which is the focus of this chapter.

Murphy (2016) emphasizes that Gardner's (1991) concepts of crystallizing moments can happen at any time, upon any moment in a day, without the ability to plan the moment(s). Crystallizing moments are any experience, positive or negative, leaving a lasting impact on the learner, and are deeper than a mere epiphany. The feeling left from the moment of crystallization cannot be undone, erased, or eradicated. Crystallizing moments forge the learner and impact their approach to both learning and learning environments. Remaining cognizant of this concept is vital to remain fully present when with students. Educators always hope students will have an enlightening moment and the memory be positive and exciting. However, no matter how hard teachers try, crystallization may also occur when teachers perform at their worst. Every teacher has feelings of worry and not getting across to students. It is normal and natural to feel this way and is possibly why teachers constantly self-evaluate and strive to continue improving their lessons, delivery, and presentation to their classroom. Teachers are always students themselves, and with this in mind, they too experience crystallizing moments that are unexpected and beneficial to their growth experienced each year.

In March 2020, the entire country faced an exponential shift in classroom delivery. Veteran teachers and novice teachers alike found themselves learning how to create a seamless interaction across a screen. Was there a necessity to only use high-tech systems and online software, or could those moments of personal interaction, classroom sharing with peer collaboration in real-time, and the never-ending curiosity of crystallizing moments? When, where, and how these things occurred would be left to discover.

Whether learning occurs in person, remote, online, or hybrid, experts agree that a positive learning environment is crucial (Fisher et al., 2021). Differentiated Instruction (Tomlinson, 2014) is also key to creating and maintaining engaging learning environments. Differentiated Instruction allows for more student choice by nature and design and is thus more child-led and child-centered than more traditional types of classroom-based instruction. The individualization possibilities within the philosophy of Differentiated Instruction connect with the process involved in creating the *Crystallizing Moments*. These concepts, especially in the primary grades, are discussed later in this chapter. Differentiated Instruction in the primary grades is a powerful tool for reaching and engaging young learners who undergo rapid development. For example, a primary classroom can have students at various levels, such as reading levels and readiness. In the online environment, differentiation is attainable through work modifications without restricting access to the whole lesson or peer interaction (Brodersen et al., 2017). It is also imperative to consider Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Online Education for young learners (Parette et al., 2010). As many parents and teachers realize today (and have especially come to realize during the COVID-19 pandemic), the use of technology for primary grades children is not inherently against the fundamentals of Developmentally Appropriate Practice. It can help to develop necessary twenty-first century learning and skills. However, instructional use of technology should be accomplished mindfully, with the whole and individual child in mind.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased primary grades students studying online and teaching and learning modalities, such as video conferencing (especially using Zoom). Most U.S. children attended school at least partially online for some duration during the pandemic. Most K-12 schools scrambled to

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