

Chapter 9

Engaging and Authentic Education Practices: Lessons From a Time of Change

Ryan MacTaggart

Educause, USA

Derek Decker

Colorado State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter is an argument for and celebration of lessons learned during the pandemic of 2020 toward the end of designing authentic and engaging learning experiences across education systems. In the forced shift to online and multimodal learning, educators and students experienced challenges of access, equity, and low engagement. However, there is an opportunity to extrapolate the lessons of 2020 for the betterment of education into the future. This chapter describes lessons pertaining to planning and collaboration, classroom environment, humanized online practices, as well as empowering pedagogy. The chapter concludes with three practical application examples for further thought and inspiration. The pandemic year can be one to survive and never think about again or, with the proper perspective, education's greatest learning moment.

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic of 2020 - 2021 shifted much of what is taken for granted across the United States and the world. The standing institutions of education – from P12 to higher education and into professional learning – have been no exception. Windowpanes divided celebrations, masks muffled transactions, relationships were built on shared struggle, and learning took on a new appearance. Seemingly overnight, education was forced to make incredible changes as institutions closed classroom doors and expanded digital reach. “Prepared” was not a term often used as the pandemic created such changes.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8032-5.ch009

Educators familiar with the physical classroom were suddenly teaching from home through a screen. Learners excited by the bustle of school hallways, university courtyards, and professional conference halls were sitting in a less enthusiastic space at home or wherever they could find space to work and learn. Stories of learners without the resources to participate in learning – a computer, internet access, learning needs, or even home itself – seemed to highlight how unprepared systems of education were. As education and educators have adapted practices for this single event, when the pandemic ends, education will have been forever changed. The system can either embrace the changes and proactively reimagine education for the better or work hard to neglect the opportunity for productive growth and attempt a return to pre-pandemic practices. As with all systemic disruptions, the pandemic offers a chance for the system and those who comprise it to learn and adapt (Senge, 2006).

The required shift to multimodal education being the norm instead of the minority was massive, quick, tumultuous, and full of learning opportunities for the education system. In the immediate onset of such change, learning seemed to stall. Surviving was the only real goal. However, as the pandemic has become better understood, there is hope to extrapolate the lessons of 2020 for the betterment of education into the future.

At the time the pandemic hit, education seemed to be on the edge of important change. Patterns were emerging from all levels of education that were putting the focus on learners and their learning while removing it from standardized assessments, strict grading for achievement, and a focus on rigor at all costs. In the years prior to 2020 educational authors and thought leaders were challenging the notions of schooling as we know it and making the argument for more authentic and engaging experiences (Caplan, 2018; Dintersmith, 2018; Mehta & Fine, 2019; Rose, 2016; Socol, Moran, & Ratliff, 2018; Spencer & Juliani, 2017; Walcutt & Schatz, 2019). Momentum was also growing across institutions for equity to be a central pillar of practice in classrooms everywhere (Blankenstein, Noguero, & Kelly, 2015; Emdin, 2016; Evans & Vaandering, 2016; Kendi, 2019; Milner, 2018; Noguero, 2009). Neither authentic learning nor equity was yet the norm across the country, but the calls for renewal were growing louder.

When closures became required, education could either embrace the voices of change and seize an opportunity or fall back onto the familiar and less impactful habits of the past. What can educators learn from the forced changes of the pandemic to move education forward?

The authors hope to illustrate that although people have developed the necessary frameworks and tools to facilitate meaningful educational renewal over the past two decades, the need had not previously been strong enough for full-scale changes. However, the pandemic of 2020 catalyzed an opportunity to pursue engaging and authentic learning at all new levels. To explore this opportunity through the eyes of those who lived it, the authors interviewed practitioners from K12 and higher education. Their voices are highlighted toward a hopeful future.

The intentional outcome of this chapter is not to prescribe what educators need to do in multimodal learning. Rather, the aim is to offer inspiration from a time of struggle and opportunity from perseverance. The authors offer ideas and examples of possible means to create engaging and authentic multimodal experiences. The reader is left to leap from this chapter as a starting point of hope, into their context and create change from there.

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