

Leveraging Technologies to Promote Clarity in Learning During the COVID–19 Pandemic: A Case Study

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this case study, the researchers examine how Mrs. Flora was purposeful in her use of technology to make her asynchronous and synchronous lessons digestible, clear, and connected to prior knowledge. In her choice of technology tools, she was mindful of ensuring that learning could occur anyplace, anytime, even if students had little to no internet in their homes. Takeaways from this chapter demonstrate how Mrs. Flora used technology not for technology's sake, rather as a means to deepen her fifth graders' knowledge base on fractions. Mrs. Flora used technology first to establish authentic relationships with students and families, and then she focused on planning. Mrs. Flora was laser-focused in her planning and delivery of online instruction, as well as clear in her explanation, examples and guided practice, and feedback. Readers will learn how one teacher used low-tech options to successfully teach her students fractions during COVID-19 and will be presented with a model of best practices to consider whether developing an online unit or teaching virtually.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 brought an abrupt change to teaching and learning in schools. The shift from in-person learning to distance learning left many of us engaging in the content, skills, and understandings of our grade-level or content area through instructional technologies that, before the pandemic, had been accessories in our classrooms. For example, the availability of Flipgrid, Loom, or PlayPosit was viewed add-ons to what we traditionally viewed as the necessary and essential tools for teaching and learning. As a result, most educators felt a sense of urgency to revisit and revise our approach to teaching.

One specific aspect of teaching and learning that captured the attention of almost all educators was our ability to ensure that learning was clear to students. Prior to the abrupt shift to learning at a distance, most educators took for granted that learners were easily accessible each and every day. To make sure learners were clear about *what they were learning*, *why they were learning it*, and *what success looked like*, all we had to do was reiterate that information from the front of the room or by simply walking over to a learner's desk and engage in a one-on-one conference. Whether we were introducing the concept of author's purpose, the area of an irregular polygon, the role of perspective in art, or the purpose of an emulsifier in culinary arts, we could immediately help learners see the what, why, and how of their learning because we were right there with them in that moment. At a distance, the advantage of proximity was stripped away from us. Furthermore, if distance learning was asynchronous, proximity and immediacy were removed from our "just in time" responses to a lack of clarity in their learning.

Yet, the absence of proximity and immediacy is not an insurmountable challenge for two very important reasons. First, distance learning and tools for learning at a distance have been around for quite some time. There are several models for teaching and learning at a distance along with research about best practices in this approach to education. Specifically, there are 18 meta-analyses, composed of 1,143 studies, involving over 4 million students that look at 1,967 aspects or effects of distance learning (Visible Learning Meta^x, 2021). Again, distance learning and distance learning tools are not new. However, the difference with the COVID-19 pandemic was time. Immediately, educators were forced to shift gears to distance learning, while students had absolutely no time to prepare for this approach to learning. Furthermore, this shift impacted the entire continuum of learners - from preschool to colleges and universities across the globe.

This unique scenario behind distance learning leads directly to the second reason why the absence of proximity and immediacy are not insurmountable challenges: Educators and students found a way. Motivated by the drive to ensure all of our learners had equitable access to the highest level of learning possible and paired with a robust body of professional knowledge about teaching and learning, educators and students pivoted synchronous and/or asynchronous learning almost overnight. While research has found that this was not without challenges (see Zierer, 2021), educators and students found ways to make sure learners were clear about what they were learning, why they were learning it, and what success looked like through the identification and implementation of digital resources. This innovative and successful use of digital resources for distance learning, both synchronous and asynchronous, mitigated the impact of COVID-19 on growth and achievement.

What follows in this chapter is a specific example of how one teacher, situated within the context of rural Virginia school, leveraged her motivation and professional knowledge to ensure that learning was clear to students. Over the next several pages, we will justify why ensuring that learning is clear to our students is a first-step in successful distance or online learning. Then, we will provide the context of this specific example and how those contextual factors informed this one teacher to leverage her motivation

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