

Teaching to Empower During the Coronavirus Pandemic

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In March of this year, as it became clear that the nation's school buildings would close for the foreseeable future in light of a global pandemic crisis and that distance learning was the only way for education to continue, student and teacher roles were upended overnight.

Amidst these radical changes, face-to-face social interactions (which for many are the most meaningful element of school and the glue that binds us all together) have been digitized. But the dispositions and behaviors that allow students to be successful as learners have been, in some ways, easier to exercise, especially when we consider the possibilities of empowerment.

While video-conferencing with students from home, we noticed that some who previously had emotional ups and downs in the classroom seem generally happier, more productive, less distracted, and more at peace without diversions by peer conflicts or worries about what others think of them. Most seem to be taking the changes in their school lives in stride. They seem glad to be focusing on assigned work and spending more of their time doing things of their choice, like taking up painting, long bike rides, or walks with family or on their own.

Other educators we work with have expressed a lot of worry about their students' overall well-being, particularly students who experience adversity. They share that the one-to-one contacts that they have made have been more positively powerful than they expected and given them a renewed sense of hope and inspiration about the relational gains that they can make with students through remote methods.

Facing Challenge with a Motivated Mindset

The challenge to foster our students' motivation is radically different in the uncharted territory of distance teaching. Before we consider what students need, it's helpful to start with ourselves. What do we need to do in order to ready ourselves for new roles that we never asked for? How do we maintain our sense of purpose, motivation, and equanimity amid so much concern about our own well-being and that of our family, friends, and communities?

Fostering student empowerment is a profound purpose. Yes, we want students to learn, but we also want them to find meaning and satisfaction in their lives. Fostering empowerment during the COVID-19 pandemic calls for renewing our purpose as educators while being able to adapt to a dramatically changed workplace. The more we can connect to our own purpose and be flexible, the better we can model and foster empowerment in our students.

It calls for us to be willing to be creative, try new ideas, listen to others without judgment, make mistakes, and collaborate. It's also important to acknowledge the stressors that we are all experiencing and take time to celebrate our capacity to deal with them. Try these strategies to strengthen your day-to-day capacity to model empowerment.

Engage in Self-Care

It's important to be aware of our physical needs for long-term wellness. We do this by seeking adequate sleep; moderate exercise; balanced nutrition; daytime light exposure; adequate hydration; daily times for quiet and reflection (such as mindfulness exercises, meditation, yoga, journal writing, reading, cooking, painting, or spending time with a pet); and frequent opportunities to offer and receive support with colleagues, students and their families, and our own families and friends.

Once we have achieved some balance by addressing our physical and emotional needs, we can model these dispositions for students' facing challenges with a degree of calm and confidence. We can send a powerful message that we are still there for them and that the work we do together give us a renewed confidence and purpose.

By maintaining our own balance, we serve students by providing an example of an adult who can practice self-care activities during times of crisis. When students see our calm and well-being, they are likely to be better able to imagine doing these things themselves.

Develop Students' Sense of Purpose

Several factors may help students establish and deepen their own drive.

1. A sense of personal control and competence. Converting students' school experiences to distance learning removes familiar elements and adds others. The centrality of peer interactions, negotiations, conflicts, and finding one's place in a social hierarchy is radically deemphasized as the home and family becomes students' daily social container. At the same time, there is great possibility for deepening communication and relationship between educators and individual students. The essential aspect is building and maintaining relationships that go beyond the routine and the expected transactions of assigning and grading work. When we express positive curiosity in and a true sense of caring for and about who children are and what they are thinking about, whether in a video conference, in a phone call, or even an exchange of emails or texts, we are fulfilling our most important function as educators.

2. A sense of individual uniqueness. Each personal contact that a teacher or student makes with one another or with the class has a potential to deepen the relationships, empathy, and understanding that all parties have with each other. For example, a teacher told us that prior to the crisis, one of her student's family had a successful food truck business. Since the crisis, the same student is going to the bank with her family and serving as a translator in order to help them to obtain relief funds.

When the unique circumstances, challenges, and life conditions of people become known to each other, through this time, there is a potential to develop trust and appreciation that transcends the traditional roles in the classroom. These relationships can be the silver lining to the hardship of this time.

3. An internalized expectation of success. Supported by positive and encouraging interactions with teachers, students can better identify, understand, and use their personal motivations to guide and inspire their learning. When we take time to listen carefully so that we can positively affirm the progress that students are making, use positive language that emphasizes what they are doing (instead of what they are not), and invite them to see themselves as capable and confident problem-solvers, students' self-expectation rises. Although this is an incredibly challenging time, it presents unanticipated opportunities that could have a positive effect on student confidence and motivation. The more we can learn to appreciate and motivate ourselves to rise to the occasion and relish the challenges, the greater the possibility that we can be models who can influence our students.

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