

# What We've Learned From 30 Days of Distance Learning

---



[blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom\\_qa\\_with\\_larry\\_ferlazzo/2020/05/what\\_weve\\_learned\\_from\\_thirty\\_days\\_of\\_distance\\_learning.html](https://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_qa_with_larry_ferlazzo/2020/05/what_weve_learned_from_thirty_days_of_distance_learning.html)

Larry Ferlazzo

May 5,  
2020

***(This is the final post in a four-part series. You can see [Part One here](#), [Part Two here](#), and [Part Three here](#).)***

The question for this new series is:

***Many schools have been teaching online for three or four weeks by now. What did you do at the start that you're continuing to do because it's working? What did you do at the start that you had to change and why? And what weren't you doing at the beginning that you're doing now and why?***

Ashley McCall, Dr. Elvis Epps, Claudia Leon, and Lorie Barber "kicked off" the series in [Part One](#).

In [Part Two](#), Bill Ivey, Jessica Cabeen, Nick Fotopoulos, and David Sherrin shared their reflections.

In [Part Three](#), Holly Spinelli, Helen Vassiliou, Michael Silverstone, and Jeremy Hyler wrote about their experiences.

This series is "wrapped up" today by Elizabeth Stein, Austin Green, Autumn Kelly, Laurie Manville, and Will Cannady.

I'm adding this post to [All Classroom Q&A Posts on the Coronavirus Crisis](#).

## **Special education**

*Elizabeth Stein is a special education and UDL instructional coach, consultant, and author. Connect with her on Twitter [@ElizabethLStein](#) and her website [www.steinlizabeth.com](http://www.steinlizabeth.com):*

At the center of our transitioning to teaching and learning from home rests our reality of experiencing extreme and complex emotions. We are all connected by these feelings of fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and gratitude. Over the past few weeks, our qualms and questions have fallen into new routines that have provided some relief as new routines have become consistent. Extreme feelings of gratitude continue to be experienced as we watch

news stories, speak with friends, and value family time. However, in the midst of this ongoing, never-ending flurry of emotions, new questions arise about how to design and implement successful learning experiences with students and families as we continue in our new remote learning spaces.

In addition, how to provide special education services raises even more questions that reveal a faster flurry of emotions for so many. [The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs](#) provides a wealth of resources along with a clear message that students with IEPs must have access to learning experiences consistent with the district's remote learning plan. There is one lofty question that is on everyone's mind: *How may the individual accommodations, modifications, and the strengths and needs of each learner be honored through this remote experience?* I focus my experiences these past few weeks in three words: emotions, connections, and technology.

### **What's working? Embracing the range of extreme and complex emotions.**

Accepting and embracing the extreme emotions that have forced their way through our lives is necessary. The countless scenarios entrusted to me by teachers, parents, administrators, and students have left me feeling empowered and helpless all in the same moment. Learning to reconcile the tension between any two very strong diverse emotions at any given moment has become a super-power for everyone. Once we accept and embrace, we may be more open to moving with the flow during this time of crisis teaching. Listening carefully during conversations has always been a critical skill. Yet there is a need for [considerations for adapting our communication](#) during these remote times. First and foremost, we must be there to support the emotional well-being of our students and families. One way this has been happening through my experiences is through individual communications in guiding parents and students to adapt the general learning plan to their personal needs on any given day.

### **What has changed over the past few weeks? Strong Connections**

The way we connect with students and families continues to expand. As everyone embraces this new process, new ways of connecting are emerging. Providing a strong connection between teachers and students continues to be an ongoing process. Phone calls, online discussion threads, and other digital modes are a great start for providing opportunities to humanize our online learning. Expanding to include videoconferencing and audio-recorded check-ins with students are welcomed connections as we all evolve in improving the process of remote learning. These stronger connections keep the moments wide open for the desired sense of calm and flexibility needed at this time.

### **What new actions have emerged? Technology Support**

My role as an instructional coach has evolved with awakening the comforts of my tech-savvy side. I have become more aware of the varying levels of comfort in others now that technology has become a critical thread in keeping us together. Teachers, for example, vary in the comfort of applying technology. Some have been using technology tools and feel the familiarity of transitioning into the new routine of teaching and learning from home. Others are in the throes of learning it while doing it. The same variability is seen with students and families. We must meet everyone where they are—and keep the process simple—while focusing on what is most important at the time. Within the last two weeks, I have been supporting teachers in applying specific digital tools to guide access and meaningful learning plans.

My experiences these past few weeks have been on guiding the balance of technology with the craving of that human connection that is felt by teachers, students, and families.



### **Like a roller coaster**

*Austin Green is a 1st grade teacher in Utah and a Utah Teacher Fellow. Follow him on Twitter @beingmrgreen:*

Schools have been teaching remotely now for several weeks. There has been a theme question that has connected us all whether inside or outside education circles: "What have we learned after several weeks of remote learning?"

There is a familiar vulnerability for all of us as we answer that question whether we are a student, educator, parent, or administrator. This article is a reflection of that question. I share some of my own as well as some of my students' experiences with permission.

Think of the best roller coaster ride you've ever been on and the thrill of riding it again and again because of the joy it gave you. "Please keep your arms and legs inside at all times and enjoy the ride," the announcer would say before each roller coaster ride would begin.

On. Off. On. Off. On. Off.

Repeat.

Repeat.

Repeat.

When I was younger, I can't tell you how many times I heard this, and it didn't even faze me. I'm not as young as I once was, but applying this analogy to several weeks of remote learning still seems appropriate.

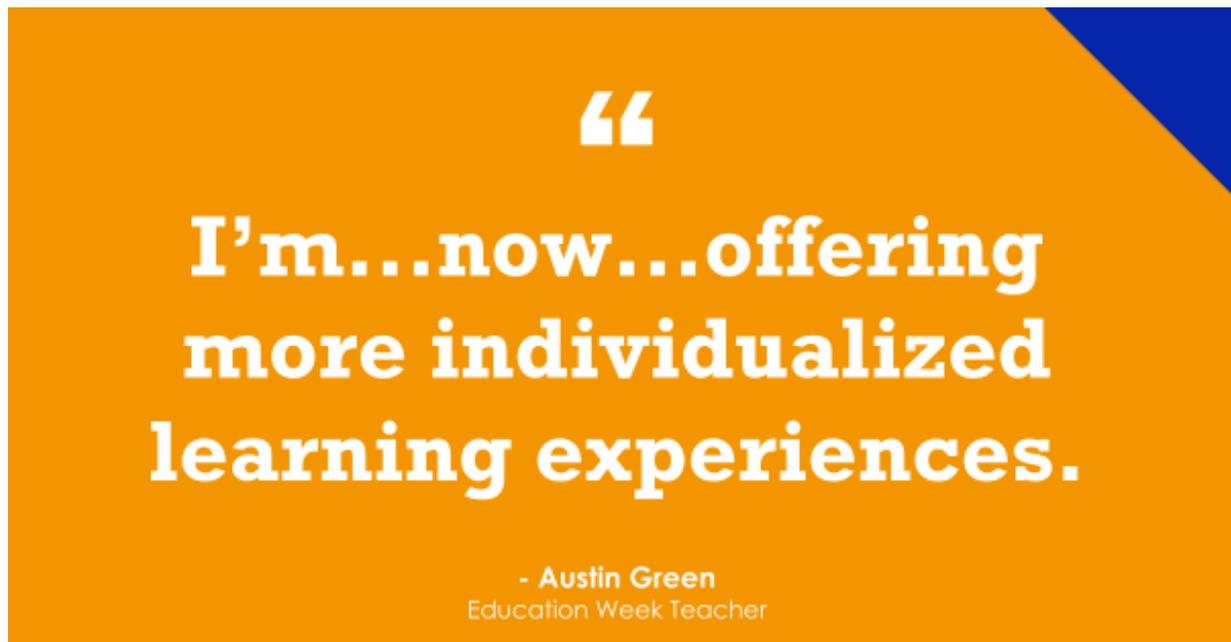
"Online learning gets over fast, and there is no waiting for others," some students related. "I want to keep doing online learning and want to do more of it," others would say.

These statements from students seem to fit the roller coaster analogy, but not being as young as them; it's been harder for their older teacher. Those of our readers who are reading this may understand what I'm talking about here.

I started doing video conferences rather quickly after we started remote learning. I felt victorious in hosting them and connecting with students. I learned rather quickly, though, that I would need to make modifications. Let's just say the first few days looked like a roller coaster full of eager and gleeful students that had peaked at the top of the climb anticipating the excitement of the ride down. Yes, we hooted, hollered, shouted, and shared excitement.

As the weeks went on, we learned how to take turns talking and sharing the mic. We learned how to incorporate engaging learning experiences that kept the same thrill as a roller coaster, and students kept coming back for more.

Something I wasn't doing at the beginning of remote learning that I'm doing now is offering more individualized learning experiences. The first few weeks, my key goal was to make connections with students and their families. Our district was also working on getting technology into the hands of our students so they could be connected. Now, we continue to strengthen those connections and offer individualized learning experiences in online small groups.



## Five points

*A Washingtonian, a happy member of the D.C. public school system, with graduate degrees from Harvard School of Education and Johns Hopkins University, Autumn Kelly's digital island of resources can be found [here](#):*

The COVID-19 health crisis has hit schools around the world like a flood. As the storm waters of COVID-19 crashed, rocked, and poured down on us, personal and professional lives instantly became one. Districts and administrators began providing tools at a fast and furious pace. A dizzying array of technological tools and plans were delivered to keep learning and instruction afloat in the storm.

Teachers were faced with a daunting task: Stay sane, stay healthy, and newly matched with every technological learning tool imaginable, they were told to build an ark. The ark to be—a virtual classroom structure from which to deliver effective instruction and meet the social emotional needs of students. Planning with purpose began.

So what did the first 30 days of crisis classroom ark building teach us? What are we still learning as we battle the continuous waves of the COVID-19 crisis? What will we take with us once we disembark from the learning at home ark into the new normal of school. Here are some lessons we have learned and some we are still learning.

- 1) Navigate the storm currents, all in one stream.

Communication is the life blood of the home learning experience. If possible, streamline your messages by type. Multiple channels of communication are necessary. Each communication channel should only broadcast one type of message. By streaming one message or instructional support per communication channel, students and families will know exactly *where* to look for what resource.

2) No matter how high the waves, reach every family and child.

It takes more effort to reach the most troubled students. Be creative, be consistent, be persistent. Diversify your method of outreach. Phone, voice, text, app, social media, local community partners, even the mail. Build a bridge to positive communication so learning can occur.

The Washington Teachers' Union delivered a home run in the District of Columbia through a partnership with Fox 5 to televise lessons from teachers to reach students without devices. If your local news station can't help, look to YouTube to create and develop content to be shown on any device.

3) Be bold and brave with the content you present.

Instruction in the middle of a crisis can be tough. Teachers often feel an inner fear that new materials or skills can't be mastered. We cannot observe our students "ahh moments" in real time so teachers are reluctant to approach uncharted instructional territory.

Trust the process. Offer video reteaching. These can also double as parent supports particularly with high school content.

Students who understand the concept can provide small-group instruction to peers. Create additional opportunities for Q&A in small groups based on students' assessment scores.

4) Create structure, space, and order in your home learning ark.

Categorize your new digital instruction universe into three groups: essential, of interest, and optional. Master the essential tools first, those that are adopted school or districtwide. Move to the interest and optional resources when you need further support in your online classroom, when you are presenting complex material, or when you feel student interest wavering. I master new digital tools by doing a 15-minute review of one new instructional resource a day. I strive to learn one new app or learning tool every three days.

5) Carve out an island of calm in the storm

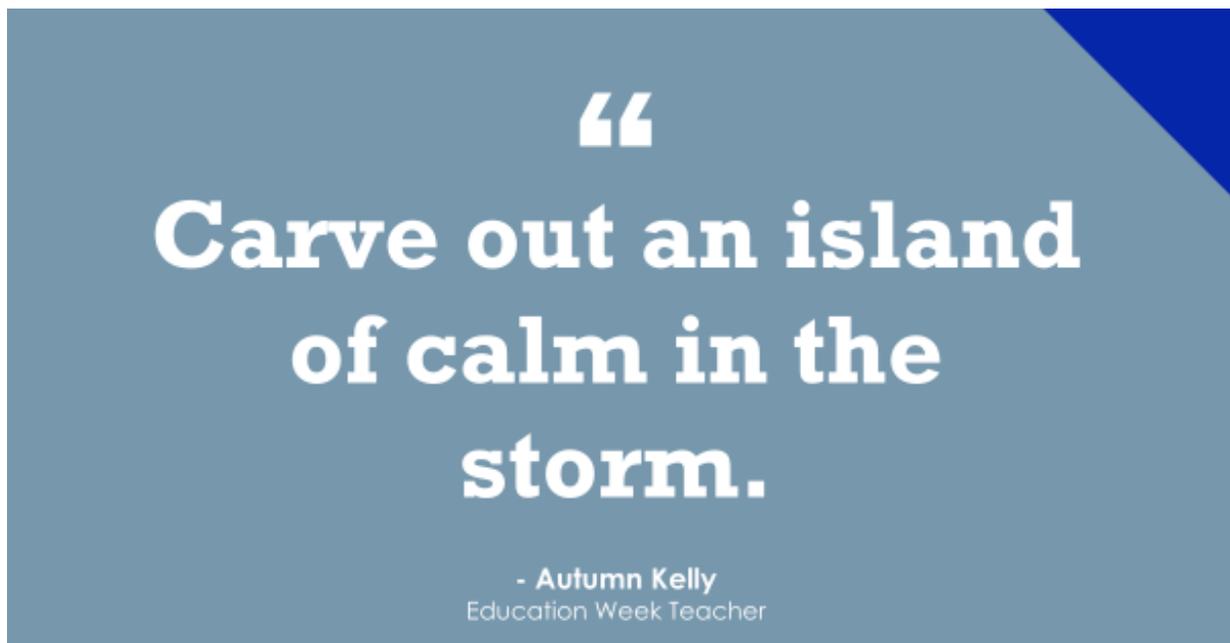
Remember to take time for you. A calm, collected teacher is able to focus and excel. D.C. public schools Chancellor Dr. Lewis Ferebee consistently empowers teachers with praise. His work reminds educators to put the emotional health of students at the forefront

of our learning-at-home outreach.

Balance the moments of your day. Hobbies matter. Enjoy engaging in the process of creating art in any form. Make yoga or home fitness a part of your day. Nurture your body with self-care and delicious foods. Make it a habit to celebrate yourself each day.

As we continue to navigate the waters of the COVID-19 crisis, day by day, two things are happening. We are getting better at the instruction we are providing and we are one step closer to reaching the new world of instruction that the COVID-19 crisis waves are taking us to.

When the history books are written, the lessons learned will have become best practice. One fact will shine through: Teachers built, teachers navigated, and teachers steered through the waves of the COVID-19 crisis bringing love from their hearts and learning to the students of their classrooms across a virtual divide.



## Relationships

*Laurie Manville is a secondary ELD/AVID Excel teacher and instructional coach in the Anaheim Union High School district and enjoys helping her students figure out what they are meant to do in life and guiding teachers in lesson-design creation:*

As I write this reflection on how the coronavirus quarantine has impacted my teaching world the past (almost) six weeks, I'm listening to my college-age daughter's voice lesson somewhere in the background. She's actually in my master bedroom closet. That particular

closet is the best simulation of a sound studio in our house. I couldn't have imagined that I would be writing *that* over a month ago.

What worked at the start of emergency remote teaching and quarantine was maintaining and building upon relationships. Knowing our students and maintaining and continuing those relationships is something Mrs. Gonzalez, our junior high's bilingual instructional assistant, and I, constantly work on. At physical classroom school, we checked in pretty much every day. In this remote environment, our students check in with us for extra help during ELD class virtual office hours a couple of times a week. This virtual lab is an extension of a student lunch meeting routine we set up at school. Mrs. Gonzalez and I also check in with students beyond lab time just like we did at school through calls, messaging, and Google forms. Because routines like these were in place before the sudden switch to online class, there was a huge payoff. It's like having had a great foundation and house already built; we just had to change the interior decorating. (Relationships with families continue to be a huge payoff in this new environment, too.)

Something that I did at the start of the switch to online teaching that I had to change was the expectation that students would participate in real-time class (and even asynchronously) through video. I was actually really surprised by this. Junior high students didn't gravitate toward video even though that is the Tik Tok world in which they live. Most of the time, they are much more comfortable answering and relaying questions in the chat box. I asked one of my beginning language-learners to turn on his mic today when we had a "guest speaker" (my high school senior daughter) join us for conversation. He flat out typed "no" in the chat box. I had to laugh but know he is shy in a regular class setting. He was the first one to jump in and type a ton of questions for our guest in the chat box, though. That being said, I am so thankful I knew my students well before moving to a completely online school environment.

What I wasn't doing at the beginning of emergency remote teaching that I'm doing now is being more and more intentional about lesson design. Intentionality, usually very important, wasn't as important at first. Instead, I was spending a lot of necessary time reaching out to students to gather them in, help them with logging in and technology workarounds, and also spending a lot of necessary time assisting colleagues with the fairly new LMS platform our district switched to at the beginning of this school year. Now, we are all settling into a routine, which makes me happy. We are starting to build an online version of normal.

“

**I am so thankful I knew my students well before moving to a completely online school environment.**

- Laurie Manville  
Education Week Teacher

### **Video-based instruction**

*Will Cannady is a community organizer and teaches 8th and 11th grade U.S. history at the School of Engineering and Sciences for the Sacramento City Unified school district:*

At the commencement of shelter in place, I searched for the best platform to reach my 8th grade and 11th grade students. My concern wasn't based on missed curriculum and history standards, but more so on my desire to be a calm and steadfast presence to my students. As I molded what would become a distance-learning plan, my first priority was to be a reassuring and informative presence to my students.

Prior to the stay-at-home order, as news of the developing pandemic trickled from the media to my students, I began each class period with a brief, research-based informative session addressing COVID-19. In order to ensure that this new classroom procedure stayed in place, I immediately started a YouTube channel. Each online lesson began with reassurance and a commitment to see my students through the remainder of the semester. Each year, I work to build rapport and meaningful connection with my students: many who desperately seek a positive adult presence in their lives. Hopefully, my service as a positive and encouraging educator helps them to better cope with the unknown and some of the new stressors they are encountering.

Another strategy I use, since implementing my distancing learning plan, is to spend additional time frontloading and scaffolding content. Through a bit of research, I happened upon O.B.S.: Open Broadcasting Software. This software allows me to record a video of myself speaking while also displaying classroom materials. To accompany each reading assignment, I create a video with the class text displayed. I use this to explain the key points

of each paragraph. I also use this software to show short high-interest clips—such as famous speeches—and to further explain confusing content. While this new normal pales in comparison to engaging classroom instruction, it still allows me to be an active presence in my students' studies.

I have adjusted my expectations with the advent of distance learning. Initially, I believed my students would benefit from a lot of classwork. I envisioned my students at home, eager to keep up with their studies. Quickly, I discovered my disconnect with the lack of response to assignments. What I hadn't taken into account was the reality of my classroom population. As a Title I school where over 80 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, many of my students held roles in their families that exceeded normal adolescent expectations. In order to try to better understand the reality of my students' new normal, I reached out. This virtual pulse check allowed me to assess their current academic workload and their ability to work at home. Through more than a few Google surveys and emails, I learned that my students had quite a bit going on in their home lives. Many acted as caregivers to younger siblings and many also assisted with household duties. At times, this prevented them from meeting deadlines and completing assignments. Again, I had to pivot my teaching strategies. I created open-ended assignments that allowed students to work at his or her own pace.

I have also found success with Google Meet. After the media exposed Zoom for security risks, I looked for an alternative. I decided to use Google Meet, which integrated directly with Google Classroom. An added bonus was the recording feature, which allows students to view content later. My students appreciated being able to interact with me in real time and get immediate responses to their questions. While some students enjoyed the live interaction, I noticed the embarrassment of others. Their concern seemed based on other students hearing or seeing something embarrassing in their homes. With this in mind, I came up with another format for student interaction. Through Google Meet, I created a live-stream option and shared an invite to each of my classes via Google Calendar. During the live stream, I created a Google Slides document where students could follow a link and ask questions. I then pick each of the students' questions and have them appear on the stream as I answer them accordingly. A little extra effort on my part to ensure my students' privacy helps engage students who are still apprehensive with video-based instruction.

“  
**I have adjusted my  
expectations with the  
advent of distance  
learning.**

- Will Cannady  
Education Week Teacher

Thanks to Elizabeth, Austin, Autumn, Laurie, and Will 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](mailto: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](https://twitter.com/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.*

[This Year's Most Popular Q&A Posts](#)

[Race & Gender Challenges](#)

[Classroom-Management Advice](#)

[Best Ways to Begin the School Year](#)

[Best Ways to End the School Year](#)

[Implementing the Common Core](#)

[Student Motivation & Social-Emotional Learning](#)

[Teaching Social Studies](#)

[Cooperative & Collaborative Learning](#)

[Using Tech in the Classroom](#)

[Parent Engagement in Schools](#)

[Teaching English-Language Learners](#)

[Reading Instruction](#)

[Writing Instruction](#)

[Education Policy Issues](#)

[Assessment](#)

[Differentiating Instruction](#)

[Math Instruction](#)

[Science Instruction](#)

[Advice for New Teachers](#)

[Author Interviews](#)

[Entering the Teaching Profession](#)

[The Inclusive Classroom](#)

[Learning & the Brain](#)

[Administrator Leadership](#)

[Teacher Leadership](#)

[Relationships in Schools](#)

[Professional Development](#)

Instructional Strategies

Best of Classroom Q&A

Professional Collaboration

Classroom Organization

Mistakes in Education

Project-Based Learning

I am also creating a Twitter list including all contributors to this column.