CYBERKinder: How the Pandemic Propelled Us Into 21st Century Learning

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"The only constant in life is change." —Heraclitus

Throughout my academic career, I have had the opportunity to present my work in many venues: from a single classroom to conferences held in hotel ballrooms. During my presentations, I like to tell stories about my life growing up in Barstow, California. I often speak about how the most important lesson that I learned from my family was resilience and how to adapt to change. In my presentations, I like to open with the story about how the isolation of my childhood helped me develop my imagination through reading and exploration. This quest for knowledge led me from my hometown on the edge of the Mojave Desert to an internship at the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.

I grew up in Barstow, California, during the 1980s, in a time before the internet was widely available. Barstow is a small isolated town located between Los Angeles and Las Vegas in the middle of the Mojave Desert. There was one main street, and our only sources of entertainment were reading, watching TV, and exploring the desert that surrounded us. In those days, the only channels available were what the receiver picked up from an antenna on the roof of our house. Then, seemingly overnight, our access to the outside world changed when cable television became available and brought us the "new" MTV channel. The first video that played on MTV was "Video Killed the Radio Star" by the Buggles. To this day, that video's message still resonates with me because of how it illustrates the way each subsequent generation constantly adapts to technological innovation.

In the spring of 2020, I was working at my kitchen table when the irony of this message eerily manifested amid the chaos that was the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. I have spent twenty years working as a Dual Language teacher for the San Bernardino City Unified School District. The 2019-2020 and the 2020-2021 school years were undeniably the most challenging of my entire career. When COVID hit, the school district shut down and gave us one week to set up a Google Classroom and design an online distance learning program. In a matter of days, we were expected to completely reinvent our profession with very little professional training. It was a challenging time, and I remember feeling overwhelmed but determined. However, I have always embraced the adversity that comes with change. I believe that it is those challenges that inspire us towards constant improvement and innovation.

I have always been a determined optimist, so I ordered books from Amazon, such as "50 Things You Can Do With a Google Classroom," and watched countless YouTube videos about how to create Google Slides. Then, Cheryl Florez, my partner teacher, and I got to work designing what would ultimately become CYBERKinder. We developed CYBERKinder as an equity response to the challenges that our community faced during the pandemic.

Immediately we were faced with four main challenges. The first challenge was engaging students: How could we get Kindergarten students to stay on the computer for 210 minutes of live instruction each day? The second challenge was making content easily accessible: How could we design a replicable model that parents and students could easily navigate? The third challenge was teaching technology to kindergarten students: How could we teach technological skills to kindergarteners who can't even read yet? Finally, the fourth challenge was differentiated instruction and family engagement:

How could we create meaningful virtual experiences for our students and their families?

As we were designing our program, we realized that our biggest challenge was how to keep Kindergarten students online live for 210 minutes in a way that was both engaging and meaningful. We knew that our students would not respond well if we just talked into the camera, so we created interactive presentations using Google Slides. The presentations were designed using research on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and virtual Kagan strategies to keep the students engaged by integrating a mix of video books, digital educational materials, songs, dance, and kinesthetic activities. We also created "Grab and Go" backpacks filled with materials and learning activities that families could use at home. Every two months, parents received a new backpack containing interactive materials for language practice, math, science experiments, and creating art projects.

To design a replicable model that made content easily accessible to both parents and students, we drew on our experience as Onboarding Coaches and mentors. As mentor teachers, we have worked with preservice teachers and adapted the same strategies we used with our student teachers to help the parents and guardians understand how to work at home with their children. We held one-on-one and group video meetings with parents and taught them about the California state standards and strategies for working with young children. We also created Google Slide presentations with directions and resources for them to use as we worked through the content of each class. In a way, it became a class within a class where we educated the parents along with their students on the best educational practices for each family. We also posted these presentations in our Google Classrooms to make them easily accessible to absent students or parents who wanted to review the lessons with their students.

Constant communication was extremely important to maintaining the success of our program. To maintain communication during distance learning, we turned to the online platform ClassDojo. ClassDojo allowed us a way to communicate with parents during the school day and answer their questions in real-time. The parents also used the platform to share photos and videos for class projects. We created virtual bulletin boards posted in our Google Classroom. The portfolio section of ClassDojo helped us maintain a digital record of our students' participation and progress. We were also able to give feedback on their work using digital stickers and the comments section for each assignment. The portfolios section of ClassDojo allowed students to upload assignments and videos, so we could listen to recordings of students reading one-on-one. This enabled us to guide parents regarding differentiated instruction and home intervention strategies. We also invited students and their parents to upload videos about their families, pets, celebrations, and other interests. We shared the videos during our Fun Friday Celebrations so that the students could learn more about each other and their families. In addition, we held a Virtual Alphabet Parade, a virtual 1950s party for the 50th day of school, and various other virtual celebrations.

Even though we were participating in distance learning, the relationships we formed were closer than any others that I have experienced in my career. Our classes even participated in both planned and impromptu virtual field trips. Students signed in from across the country and even took us on vacation with them. For example, one student signed in from the Circus Circus Hotel in Las Vegas. During the pandemic, many of my students' families returned to Mexico in order to be with their relatives. One of the most interesting things we experienced as a class was when one of my students gave us a tour of the outdoor markets in Guanajuato, Mexico. He signed in to class using an iPhone and then used the camera to show us what he was seeing as he shopped with his grandmother.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I was concerned about how to create meaningful experiences for my students. However, over time the process evolved remarkably as the students adapted to using digital technology. First, we taught the students how to navigate a Google Meet using pictures and Bitmojis. Next, Mrs. Florez created a story presentation to teach students and their parents how to use Google Classroom. Finally, we encouraged them to talk to each other on camera during Social Emotional Learning (SEL) lessons and virtual recess so that they could build relationships with the class. It was amazing to see how open students were with each other. They shared about their toys, pets, and lives and soon became bonded in friendship with us and each other, even though we'd never actually met in person. By the end of the school year, they were typing messages to each other in the chat using emojis. And so it was that another generation demonstrated resilience through crisis, and CYBERkinder was born through the perseverance of the human spirit! ❧