

Distance learning

By Anthony Carnovale

I've been teaching for 20 years. In some ways, I feel like I haven't worked a day in my life. I love working with young people, with young minds, with young adults trying to live out their dreams, to better themselves. I love how I learn something new every day. In many ways, my students teach me more than I teach them. I like the way we are there for each other, present for one another.

Teaching is hard work; I try not to make it look hard. I run a casual classroom; I've never worn a tie. I want my students to feel safe and welcome when they walk into my classroom. Making things look easy is hard work.

For one, I've developed a routine. It goes something like this:

After pulling into the parking lot, I walk directly to my portable. I use this time to get focused, to take a few deep breaths and get myself grounded for the day. Once I'm in the classroom, I turn on the Christmas lights, my desk lamp; I open the blinds and check my plants. I set my bags on my desk, put my lunch on the shelf. I sit at my desk and take a few minutes to myself. I then check to see if the Wi-Fi is up and running and make sure that the links imbedded into my lessons are working. I go over my plans and make up my to-do list for the day.

Twenty minutes before class begins, I walk into the school building. I make it a point to say good morning to as many kids as I can; I chirp the kids I know well. I walk into the staff room and check my mailbox. I head back to class. I'm at my desk by the sound of the first bell. I check over my attendance from the previous day. I hear the door open. It begins:

Ashanti. Ethan. Joey. Harris. Alessia. Nicholas.

I greet each student as they walk into class. Some are on their phones. Kenny always gives me a fist-pump; Harris doesn't say a word. Dakota pretends she doesn't want to be there, but I know she does. Devin mumbles good morning (the only thing he'll say all morning). Ashanti likes to scream hello and walks to her desk like someone who knows what she's doing and where she's going in life. The second bell rings- they day officially begins.

Shante. Dakota. Devante. Jackie.

I start every class, not matter the grade, not matter the level, with a prompt, something to get the kids thinking and writing before we get to the formal part of the lesson. I expect them to write or draw or doodle their response to the prompt I have assigned them. The prompt can be a song, a video, a picture, a question, a statement that is, in some way, connected to the theme of the day's lesson (For example, when we were studying George Orwell's 1984 and the idea of authoritarian rule and censorship, I included a rule for that day's prompt: they were not allowed to use the letter e anywhere in their response). They write for five minutes; we share for five minutes.

Brian. Lucas. Kacey. Nchelem. Joshua.

The second part of my lesson is teacher oriented. I take the stage for 20 minutes or so. This is where I teach them the rules to the concepts we are learning. If they get good at applying these rules, I'll eventually show them how to break the rules.

Dylan. Cassandra. Zafirah. Joshua. Brendan. Zara.

When I'm done, it's time for them to get up and out of their seats. It's time for me to step aside and give them the floor. Over the past few years, I've learned that the less time I spend teaching, the more time they spend learning. This is where they're asked to apply their knowledge and understanding, not just from the day's lesson, but also the unit, even from previous grades and classes. I put

them into groups and have them work on a task. I expect them to participate, and to respect one another's opinions. I circulate, listen and take part. After 20 minutes or so, I ask them to share their findings. We don't listen to all groups; sharing is not the important part, the work leading up to it is. When they've returned to their regular seats, we have ourselves a quick debrief, and I'll assign something for them to work on at home.

Anthony. Carlos. Jackson. Devin. Julia. DeShawna.

By this point, there are a few minutes left before the bell rings. The kids will start packing up, some take out their phones and see what they've missed on Tik-Tok. I'll walk around the class, talk to the kids, make mental notes of the things I need to address in tomorrow's lesson. When class is over, I stand by the door as they leave. I say goodbye to each of them ? TJ, Kalyhia, Mohammed, Brent ? followed by a fist pump, sometimes a hug.

Danielle. George. Aleeza. Magda. Cole.

When I'm alone, I clean up what's been left behind, straighten a few desks. I put the kettle on and think about the things I need to do for the next day.

There hasn't been a 'next day' for close to two months now. The routine that we worked so hard for, that students and I got so used to, that allowed our class to run so smoothly (most days), has been blown to pieces. The fist-pumps, chirps, smiles and banter have been replaced by emails, texts, phone calls and emojis. Distance Learning is a new way of learning. It's not the same. It can't be.

I'm trying. We're all trying. We can't do it alone. For it to work, schools need to have the resources to implement remote learning, students need access to computers and reliable internet connections, and parents need to have the ability, time, energy, and patience to turn into home-school instructors. This is not an easy ask.

Needless to say, some students are succeeding; others not so much. A well-run school can help minimize the socioeconomic differences that exist in any community. Every child has access to teachers, administrators, social workers, a library, computers, a free breakfast. Outside of school is a different story. Educators and support workers are doing what they can do provide these same supports to those most in need. I have a student that has one computer in a household of seven people; she only has access to the computer between 1 and 3 a.m.. When I think about the students who haven't yet submitted any work, I think about something a student told me a few years ago: ?Sir, data is for rich people.? On top of their studies, they are dealing with childcare, family job losses and mental health issues. It kills me that I can't be there in person to help them. I can only hope and pray that some of the things we have learned in the classroom are now helping them outside of it.

Amaru. Jerome. Dante. Alessia. Keyon.

I miss my students. I miss our daily routine. I miss seeing them walk through the classroom door. I miss calling out their names while I take attendance; I miss hearing them answer back: present.