Coronavirus: Technology helps teachers rethink distanced learning

September 2 2020, by Daniel Wu, The Mercury News

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Every teacher knows and dreads it: the look of a bored student. This school year, with a sea of new faces he's never seen before, sixth-grade teacher Zac Hansel is more worried than usual.

"Right now, at the beginning of the year, we have one shot to get them in and keep them in," said Hansel, who teaches at Santa Rita Elementary

School in Los Altos, Calif.

That's easier said than done when teachers are still adjusting to the challenges of teaching online, especially when the students don't know them—and vice versa. How do you rethink a profession that hinges on personal engagement and variety to work solely through video calls and computer screens? In the time of coronavirus, teachers like Hansel are making it work with creativity, a dizzying array of new apps and software, and a lot of patience. And they're learning a lot along the way.

Essays and worksheets are outdated.

From home, Hansel conducts group discussions using FlipGrid, a site where students send in short video responses to assignments and prompts like a scholarly Snapchat.

Rebecca Ayala, an eight-grade teacher at August Boeger Middle School in San Jose, builds her lessons on NearPod, which allows her to combine slides with polls, quizzes and mini-games. For a lesson on U.S. History, she held a virtual field trip by adding virtual reality street views of Washington D.C.

Ayala's also tried her best to recreate the fun parts of the classroom online. Before, she'd throw parties for her best behaved class. She can't do that online, but she thinks she can woo her best performing students this year with the next best thing.

"That student, I'm going to order them DoorDash, and it's going to go straight to their door for lunch," she said.

It's changes like these that Hansel and Ayala hope will improve the online learning experience for their students this year—and help overcome the challenge of teaching engaging lessons through a computer

screen.

"Teaching is a deeply interpersonal skill—it's about presence, and it's about interaction," said Kas Pereira, a former high school teacher in San Jose who is a teacher-in-residence for a training program run by Foothill College's Krause Center for Innovation. "When you move to an online environment... there's the lack of connection that teachers rely on and that students rely on, frankly, to know that their teacher cares about them."

Ayala said she struggled at first to hold classes online.

"It was definitely uncomfortable for me at the end of last year," she said. "I didn't know how to really just be online with them."

At Santa Rita, Hansel saw seasoned teachers vent about no longer being able to draw upon go-to methods and techniques they relied on in the classroom.

"They've been dealing with in-person engagement for 20 years and they're like, 'I know all the tricks in the book,' and then you throw them online and they're like, 'I know none of the tricks,' " he said. "None of our teaching programs taught us how to teach virtually. It's just not what we're taught."

The summer was a chance to change that. As uncertainty loomed over the upcoming school year, school districts invested in training to give teachers more experience with online teaching. Ayala taught with a summer school program in her district. Hansel volunteered to teach at the training program run by Foothill College.

As part of the Foothill program, Pereira and Hansel taught teachers how to use administration services like Google Classroom or Canvas, manage

their video calls and slideshows and vary online assignments—uncharted territory for many.

One week into the new school year, classes already looked a little different. The catalogue of applications and online services Hansel and Ayala learned to use over the summer has helped restore some variety to their lesson plans.

Better planning on the district level this year has helped too. At August Boeger, a regular timetable with breaks and class periods ensures students receive enough synchronous time with their teachers and that it's adequately spaced out. Hansel said his district mandated that teachers meet individually with each family at the start of the year, a practice he wants to continue even after the pandemic ends.

"We should have been doing this a long time ago," Hansel said. "It is such an eye opener to see the parents interacting with the kids, to hear their conversations back and forth."

Hansel sees a few more silver linings to online learning too. He's been impressed, he says, by how creative and independent his students have been in troubleshooting problems and finding alternative ways to submit assignments. Ayala has found that identifying struggling students is actually easier online with a gallery of video calls and NearPod's tools to track students' progress.

It's not a perfect picture—Hansel is eager to return to a hybrid model of learning at least, and worries for his lower-income students who haven't had the stability at home to engage as much in lessons. But he's optimistic that, for as long as they have to be online, teachers are on the right track.

At August Boeger, Ayala is pitching in to help train her colleagues in

NearPod and Canvas—the more comfortable they get, the more interactive tools and apps they can include in their lessons. At the end of the day, she says, she wants to make sure her students are learning.

"Our students' whole world has been falling apart," she said. "I think most teachers are in there because their heart is in teaching, because they realize we need to provide some type of stability for our students now."

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Citation: Coronavirus: Technology helps teachers rethink distanced learning (2020, September 2) retrieved 28 April 2024 from
https://phys.org/news/2020-09-coronavirus-technology-teachers-rethink-distanced.html