

What COVID-19 Cannot Take From Us

By Kathy King-Dickman | Categories: From the Field

For me, becoming a virtual teacher has been filled with pitfalls, humor, hard work, and, finally, joy. This journey has not been an easy one. Like most of us, I do my best work when I can be near other humans, whether children or teachers. When I am working with a group of teachers in a presentation room or with children in a classroom, I feel extreme joy. I know that this is the work I came here to do. The joy of teaching and learning from others gives me a high equal to nothing else. That is why I have balked for the last several years at presenting virtually. I just could not imagine how I could connect with folks without being able to sit shoulder to shoulder and watch as they planned successful lessons for their students; without being able to use proximity to show I am interested in their thoughts; without being able to hear their best stories and to share mine; without giving hugs at the end of the day; and without being able to visit with teachers or students during breaks and asking about their family, students, and life. In other words, I couldn't imagine teaching without forming the most important thing we have in this life—RELATIONSHIPS.

I simply could not imagine teaching others while my aging face projected into the rooms of my students, looming like the Wizard of Oz, or getting to know them when their faces were in tiny 1-inch by 1-inch squares projecting from my computer. For several years, I simply did not sign up for any virtual work and neglected to encourage my schools to learn from me in this manner. Then came COVID-19. My way of work was no longer possible and it became clear I had to join the 21st century or retire. Not ready for the latter, I stepped hesitantly into the world of virtual instruction.

My first experience was a disaster but like most events in my life, not without humor. All Collaborative Classroom consultants had been given the wonderful opportunity to practice a virtual session with a small group of peers. My granddaughters, who were visiting at the time, had been told in no uncertain terms by my daughter and myself that they were not to bother Grandma during this session. Shortly after I began to present, these precious two- and three-year-old angels, who could not stand the curiosity of a rare moment when Grandma did not want them with her, quietly snuck into my office and squirmed onto my lap. My daughter quickly noticed them missing and came to the rescue, from which ensued in a pulling match—my little granddaughters locked around my neck with their mother desperately pulling them off as they screamed, “We want Grandma!”—all while I navigated my Zoom session.

As the spring and summer wore on, I heard from many teachers about their challenges in teaching with their own children in the house. Stories of two year olds crawling out of pet doors and older children locking toddlers out of the house while mom tried to teach put some salve on my wounds. I recently found that becoming comfortable with Zoom does not prevent natural disasters. Just yesterday, my nice new desk chair collapsed as I was mid-sentence, causing a clattering sound as my face quickly disappeared from the screen and my bare feet popped onto it. Luckily no one noticed the raggedy sweat pants I was wearing (with the assumption that when online we only have to dress nicely from the waist up.)

I have come miles since my first disastrous attempt at virtual instruction. I finally feel comfortable using break out rooms, sharing multiple screens with slides and other information, and adding needed links to the chat box. Much more importantly, I now feel comfortable forming relationships with new teachers or students through a screen. I have learned that there are some things COVID-

19 cannot take from us:

- COVID cannot prevent us from sitting alongside teachers or students (albeit via a screen) as they plan a lesson or work on a project.
- COVID cannot prevent us from scooting to the edge of our seat and listening intently as a student or teacher shares a thought or question.
- COVID cannot prevent us from sharing our best stories and listening while teachers or students share theirs.
- COVID cannot prevent us from looking up the demographics surrounding a school and learning as much as we can about the children's home lives.
- COVID cannot prevent us from calling home to connect with families.
- COVID may prevent us from hugging our teachers or students, but it does not keep us from sharing our warmest smile.

In other words, COVID cannot prevent us from forming relationships with our students or teachers. We just have to work a bit harder to do so—by using break out rooms in formats such as Zoom, keeping our tone of voice warm and friendly, smiling, and showing genuine interest in what all have to say.

We at Collaborative Classroom know that relationships are at the heart of all effective instruction. We know that without positive relationships, a community of learners cannot be formed, and without a community of learners, learning will not be maximized. My wish for you all, whether your role is educating adults or children, is that you continue to form strong relationships as you did before COVID-19 became a part of our world. I hope that whether remotely or in person, you will bond with your students and guide them to bond with one another.

I am scooting to the edge of my seat (very carefully) and sending you all my best wishes that COVID-19 will be gone soon. I am also sending the hope that until that time, you will do your best to form relationships with all the souls you teach.