



What a Year and a Pandemic Will Do

A Journey Through a Year of Virtual Learning

We recognize the one anniversary of our world transforming overnight, literally, no hyperbole. One day millions were heading to work, waiting for the school bus, attending face-to-face meetings, socializing families and friends, and generally interacting with other humans as encoded into the human essence. 24-hours later, terms like remote learning, virtual meetings, sharing screens, mute, chat, Zoom, and Go To Meeting barged into our collective vocabulary. There was a new norm, and not everyone liked it.

Without significant warning, teachers and students faced a mountain of never-before-seen challenges. Many threw up their hands, clenched their fists, called their therapists, had a second or third drink, and screamed, "I don't know how to communicate over a computer screen! I don't want to." Students shrieked, "How am I supposed to learn about circuit boxes and dampers over a computer screen?" The uncertainty and fear of educating over the internet where real-live human beings sit in little boxes on a screen were raw. Zooming was not correct; it went against DNA coding. Fire, brimstone, thunderbolts, lightning, and cats and dogs live together, mass hysteria spreads. People faced a need for a shift in mindset to embrace virtual learning. We heard colleagues utter phrases never intended to be spoken in the presence of priests, judges, or grandmothers. The rebellion was in the air.

Zoom to the present. Surprised by what one sees, hears, and feels when uttering the words "virtual learning?" Gone are whines, whimpers, and demonstratives. In a chat, you read that students like this whole virtual "thing" In a break-out room, hear a teacher claim his appreciation for remote teaching; would not be upset if he has to do it again.

We have all reached the point of Zoom fatigue. The time to return to the old way is now. We are left to ponder why so many had epiphanies to see the benefit of pursuing education on screen? One does not have to search far and wide for an answer. It is very convenient to pursue one's education from the luxury of home. No longer do people who have started their workdays before sunrise need to travel to any place but home sweet home. Gone are the days of leaving home early and coming home late and no more rushing to get from point A to point B. There are moments for people to eat a meal before class. Showers thaw joints from outside elements, wet clothes find dryers, and families come together again. An online education world's convenience and flexibility are a win-win for all, teachers and students alike.

The benefits of virtual teaching and learning experience go beyond the apparent creature comforts. The pandemic forced segments of generations to learn new communication, collaboration, and technological skills. People developed new strategies and broadened points of view to enhance resumes. The acceptance of virtual learning energizes them as a valid and valued form of education. Companies that vary in shape, size, goals, and clients actively search for potential employees who are comfortable working in the virtual world. Hiring coordinators celebrate the determination and focus required, along with the confidence gained from persevering navigation through rapidly-changing technology. Soft skills of open-mindedness, patience, humility, and flexibility developed in every virtual class. The people who needed talking off bridges now experience a renaissance of creativity, curiosity, and purpose. Many are the people who remember rotary phones, cassette tapes, and four channels on television. The list of virtual learning successes must include the inclusion of "senior" folks who stepped up and did what they needed to do.

If the past year reinforces anything, it is that humans crave interaction and connection. We survive through interpersonal relations, and the relations that matter the most grow from surrounding ourselves with people. At the same time, it is safe to say that the best form of education comes from in-person experiences and dialogue. It is also safer to say that we can learn in a virtual world. Some will undoubtedly look forward to the day they can shut off their screens and return to the in-person world. No one would blame them; we learned that teaching and learning outside of the traditional theater will happen with a bit of faith. We can do it again if the need arises, and truth be told, it was not all that bad looking back. We did a pretty good job taking lemons to make lemonade.

Jeff Cournoyer
Education Coordinator