

Teaching during COVID-19

As a worker, are you essential, non-essential or front-line? COVID-19 has sorted us into categories we don't usually contemplate. And what is essential work anyway? Excluding some people from stay-at-home orders has made us appreciate those who leave the safety of home to ensure material survival for the rest of us.

But some who stay at home are also essential workers — that is, if you consider the development of young minds essential work. All over the North Fork (and beyond) teachers must teach from their computer screens, struggling to get anxious and preoccupied students to focus remotely on the definition of a biome (a biological community like a forest or desert) or the elements of a comparative essay.

Recent interviews with two of them illustrate the range of effects that this new abnormal is having on their pedagogy and on their lives. If the job is difficult — “Teachers are actually working harder right now than they ever have,” Randi Weingarten, head of the national teachers’ union, said last week — it is perhaps even more so for teachers like these, who work with immigrant students still mastering English.

For John Myers, in Southold, guiding 30 high school students through global studies and biology even as he acquaints them with language and culture in their new country is exhausting. Starting at 8 a.m. every weekday, he uses Google Classroom to post assignments, provide feedback (and, ultimately, grades) and send informational text and illustration for his six classes.

All day long he answers and sends texts and emails and handles phone calls. “I am pretty much on call from when I wake up until I go to sleep,” he said.

It's not easy to keep his students focused on school. In normal times his classroom is a lively place, where Mr. Myers the instructor is also the kindly uncle, the jovial cheerleader. Now that the students don't see him and he doesn't see them, he can't provide the same personal connection or deliver his usual mantra about the importance of education.

The state recently announced the cancellation of Regents exams, and some students continue to work hard despite this gift. But others exploit the opportunity that frees them from the physical classroom by taking on full- or part-time jobs, and just don't log on: “Their work ethic is bigger than their school ethic,” said Mr. Myers.

As a teacher of students with limited English, he has a dual mandate: to take the students' English skills to the next level and to demystify the use of English in their other courses. In the former role, he assigns lots of writing — not so difficult from a distance. But assisting students in a comparison of Mao and Ghandi for a global studies class — breaking down the answer into comprehensible parts, explaining vocabulary — requires hand-holding that can't be done remotely. It is hardly surprising that, faced with such assignments, students resort to copying sentences from their textbooks.

Candi Harper, who teaches English

composition to language learners at Suffolk County Community College, faces no such motivation problems. Her students have already scaled many hurdles to get to college and many know where they are headed afterward. Separated by the spring break, they are glad to be working together, a community enabled by the use of Zoom, an interactive video platform that can mimic the give and take of the physical classroom.

Ms. Harper is discovering some limits to distance learning, however. Although the students can see her and each other, she hasn't figured out how to bridge the distances between them for group projects. And, guided by a supervisor's advice, she has simplified the content of each class.

“I'm still teaching the same curriculum,” she says, “but I'm trying not to introduce too many different ideas in one online class. I would rather they truly understand a narrow range of concepts.” By semester's end, her students will have turned in several different types of essays and taken a final exam online. She expects everyone to pass.

Online learning pre-dated COVID-19, but the pandemic gave it a boost. Addressing the challenges it presents to teachers will be a significant task for educators in the post-pandemic world.

Diana Gordon lives in Greenport and is the author of 'Village of Immigrants: Latinos in an Emerging America.'

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John Myers

GUEST SPOT
DIANA GORDON

