

## Lessons From the Edge A learning curve for all

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Résumé de l'article

When schools across this province were ordered to close on March 13, 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, classroom teachers could never have imagined the profound repercussions of this decision and the colossal impact this would have on both teachers and students across Quebec. Teachers scrambled to upgrade their technology skills as school boards quickly mobilized to provide much-needed technical support and hardware for teachers, students, and parents/guardians. More than ever, home and school needed to be connected. In a quick response to the urgent need to provide a continued opportunity for learning, the virtual classroom soon took centre stage.

In January 2022, a couple of months before the pandemic sent us into lockdown, I became a McGill Field Supervisor for the Faculty of Education as my career as a secondary school/ adult education ELA teacher would soon come to a close. I had planned to retire that June after teaching for 42 years at the English Montreal School Board. In my three final months at the EMSB, I designed, with a colleague, an online Secondary 5 ELA course, and became very well-acquainted with Microsoft Teams and all it had to offer. The course was both solid and engaging, affording the students the opportunity to work on their own, in small groups in break out rooms, and co-operatively as a whole class. Students were expected to participate and were held accountable for their contributions to the learning experience.

# Lessons From the Edge

## A learning curve for all



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When schools across this province were ordered to close on March 13, 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, classroom teachers could never have imagined the profound repercussions of this decision and the colossal impact this would have on both teachers and students across Quebec. Teachers scrambled to upgrade their technology skills as school boards quickly mobilized to provide much-needed technical support and hardware for teachers, students, and parents/guardians. More than ever, home and school needed to be connected. In a quick response to the urgent need to provide a continued opportunity for learning, the virtual classroom soon took centre stage.

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Lorsque les écoles de la province ont reçu l'ordre de fermer le 13 mars 2020 en raison de la pandémie de Covid-19, jamais on n'aurait pu imaginer les répercussions de cette décision et l'impact colossal que cette décision aurait sur les enseignants et enseignantes et les élèves du Québec. Dès lors, les membres de la profession se sont empressés de mettre à jour leurs compétences technologiques. Parallèlement, les centres scolaires se sont rapidement mobilisés pour fournir aux enseignants, aux élèves et aux parents le soutien technique et le matériel nécessaire pour composer avec cette nouvelle réalité. Plus que jamais, le domicile des élèves et l'école devaient être connectés. Pour répondre au besoin des apprentissages, la classe virtuelle a pris rapidement le devant de la scène.

The subject-specific competencies as well as the cross-curricular were the focal point of our lessons. Many activities were inter-active, and some allowed for anonymity as a drawing card. As well, multi-media presentations were incorporated into each lesson. Accommodation was made for preferred learning styles and the learning challenged as well as student personal choice. Focused tasks changed every 15 minutes within the lesson, were relevant, meaningful, and timely. These were the cornerstones we used in creating our ELA course. The same cornerstones could be used for any course of study. Add to this mix, quick feedback to students and a dose of good humour, and we have the recipe for a great blend. Of course, it needs to be tested and tweaked constantly, and tailored to the needs of the students in the classroom.

As I reflect on that process, I recall my efforts to take as many tutorials as possible offered by Microsoft. Thankfully, my much-younger collaborator had a greater ease in dealing with the technology. I had no idea at the time that this experience would help me to transition into a virtual observer/evaluator in the hybrid and totally virtual classrooms of my student teachers that fall and thereafter.

The pandemic called upon student teachers to be flexible, adaptable, and innovative more than ever, and they more than rose to the challenge! Whether using Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams or Zoom, they were fearless, relentless, and unflappable. Any technical glitches were taken in stride and either quickly resolved or replaced with an alternate plan of action. All the important strategies related to successful student-based learning were carried over from the physical classroom to the virtual one, particularly when marrying both physical and virtual in a hybrid model when half the class was present in the physical classroom and the other half was participating online from home. Student teachers never failed to amaze and inspire me as they learned to skilfully juggle both – the physical and the virtual – having all students actively participate in their learning. That was key! Every student was expected to participate, and every effort was made by the student teachers to create an excellent rapport with the students before the class officially was underway. The transition was seamless - as it should be.

The added bonus in the use of these various platforms was the ability to instantly communicate with both the students and their parents/guardians, and to gauge each student's progress. Teacher feedback could be instantaneous adding to the prospect for success. Deadlines for assignments were set, work was submitted, graded, and could be reviewed easily. It created an opportunity for greater dialogue between teacher and student, and between home and school if a student were falling behind in submitting any work. As well, lessons could be reviewed at the students' leisure, allowing them to learn at their own pace. This feature accommodated those students

who needed the extra time to review and understand the academic material presented in a lesson. This holds true for all subjects being taught and studied, from reviewing the solution of an equation in mathematics to a live demonstration of a chemical reaction in the science lab.

As a McGill Field Supervisor, there was a monumental shift for me in how I mentored and evaluated the student teachers placed in my care, one that required a steep learning curve for me. All meetings that would have been in person with student teachers and their co-operating teachers as well as debriefs after evaluations were now carried out virtually, either using Zoom or Webex. All classroom observations were carried out virtually as well, either live or recorded for submission, always ensuring that the students' individual privacy rights were respected. I was present in every one of those classrooms as the computer became my eyes and ears.

One added advantage was that commute time was eliminated. I could supervise students who were great distances away and never have to leave home. I never had to worry about parking when I reached my destination. Also, more than one observation/evaluation could be scheduled in a day although student teachers were in schools many miles apart, a task that could prove to be challenging if not impossible for a supervisor. Additionally, a recorded lesson had an added benefit. It allowed me to review the teaching episode more than once, at my leisure, and had a timeline for easy referral when giving feedback.

Most importantly, to keep the lines of communication open, there was a constant flow of emails between the triad (student teacher, co-operating teacher, and supervisor), and often a quick telephone call was made when communication was urgent. We were constantly in touch.

As with all transitions, there were difficulties and challenges along the way. Together, we have faced these initial challenges and found solutions. The key is to stay positive and open to change. Just as we have strived for excellence in teaching and learning in the physical classroom, we must now aspire to do so in the hybrid and the completely virtual classroom as well. As we become more practiced in the use of these various platforms and programs, the richer the learning experience becomes for all participants.

If there is one lament that I have often heard from my student teachers, it is that we were never able to meet in person and to sit down together to enjoy a cup of coffee. I am open to that invitation now that restrictions have been lifted although I am not certain how far we'd have to travel to do so. Alternatively, we could still meet for a friendly chat on Zoom as we both share a cup of coffee in our separate locations. Let's set a date and time. So many possibilities and the learning curve continues.