It's Like 'Teaching Two Classes at Once'

March 2, 2021

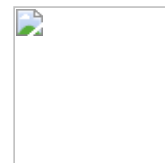Images shows colorful speech bubbles that say "Q," "&," and "A."

iStock/Getty

[Larry Ferlazzo](#)
[Opinion Contributor](#), [Education Week](#)
Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif.

The question-of-the-week is:

Today, Elisabetta Landoni, Matt Blaser, Kyle Lawrence, and Caroline Shearer provide their ideas.

'Your Students Don't Expect Fireworks'

Elisabetta Landoni is an ESL teacher in Valencia, Spain. She is also a journalist, photographer, and illustrator:

I was thrown into the deep end of hybrid teaching in October 2020. One day, the Spanish government cut down the number of students who could sit in my classroom, and the next, it felt like I was teaching two classes at once. For the second time in a year, I had to learn how to teach from scratch and on my own. I struggled, cried, and spent entire weekends in bed. But four months later, I can honestly say that hybrid teaching works just fine. Here are a few tips to make your hybrid-teaching life easier from the start:

1. Start with a video

The first 5-10 minutes of a hybrid lesson can easily become the most stressful (for you) and the longest (for your students). People walk in as you are busy accepting online students and removing trolls; you have to look everywhere to do the register; and as soon as you get the lesson started, latecomers begin pouring in everywhere, and you have to start it all over again.

To avoid all this, simply play a short video on a revision topic at the beginning of each class. This way, you can focus on the register, while giving those connecting online enough time to independently fix their audio. Once you hear all of them joining in answering the video questions, you are good to go.

2. Breakout rooms: use in moderation

While breakout rooms are excellent for online teaching, they don't work as well in the hybrid classroom. You can't jump in and out to offer support as the students in the classroom either shout at each other to overcome the distance between their seats or claim all of your attention. Consequently, those in the rooms feel abandoned and start a coffee club in Spanish instead of getting on with their task.

I overcame this by giving "mini-tasks" before sending them to the rooms for a short time. For example, I tell them to plan a dialogue on a topic. Then I close the rooms and offer support by answering questions and boarding vocabulary. After checking that everyone is on track, I send them back to the rooms to finish up their dialogue. The same happens in the classroom.

3. Stick to "radio feedback"

Online, we've all struggled with "Zoom ghosts"—profile pictures only and cameras always "off." Many seemed to find the "on" button as soon as I started connecting from their schools instead of my kitchen. The first time I got so excited that I pulled their faces on the big screen behind me, so the two groups "could see each other." Big mistake. Some cameras quickly went off, while those who stayed somehow caused everyone, themselves included, to burst into laughter.

Big screens are still too exciting in 2021. Stick to "radio feedback," where the students in class ask questions to the ones online and vice versa, but they only hear their answers through the speakers. Most of us are wearing a face mask anyway, which is not ideal for language learning, but I'm sure it will improve our projection and/or listening skills in the long run.

4. Be creative

"Games, games, games" was the way to go when teaching online. We all built a big library of online games to keep it fun and varied through the worst bit of the pandemic. Now, half of those are not going to work anymore, and our old classroom activities are just as useless as they were in 2020.

Time to get creative again! Sometimes, tweaking an old game will do the trick. For example, I took an online memory card game and simply wrote numbers and letters on two sides. This way, the online students could match pairs by saying "1-C and 4-B" while the ones in the classroom came to the IWB and turned the cards over. It is also a great way to revise numbers and letters for my little ones!

If in doubt, don't hesitate to ask your students for ideas. They're digital natives and know the games well. They'll be thrilled to help you find solutions and play more!

5. Don't be a wizard

If you are anything like me, you may want each of your lessons to flow smoothly from the beginning till the end. It might still happen or (most likely) it might not. And that's OK! We are a year into a global pandemic, and you are getting up, going to school, fighting technology, and smiling to your students behind a sweaty face mask every day. Your strength is the magic.

Keep your lessons simple and create a comfortable routine for everyone. Your students don't expect fireworks. Do your best, put them first, and they will appreciate it. Don't panic if learning doesn't happen immediately or as fast as it used to. The change is a shock for them, too. They will get used to it and surprise you again, very, very soon.

Room & Tech Setup

Matt Blaser is a 7th grade science & ELA teacher at Crone Middle School in Naperville, Ill.:

We all know how challenging the past calendar year has been for our profession. And for many of us, the newest challenge sent our direction in the past several weeks, or in the coming weeks, is delivering instruction to students both in person and online at the same time. I think I was more nervous my first day of this hybrid model than I was on the first day of my career 18 years ago. I have learned so much from the past three weeks, and each day, I get just a little better at managing in-person and online students simultaneously.

My first piece of advice, if possible, is to get into your building and work on your setup before hybrid teaching begins. The teachers that I have seen struggle the most had their first day in the building at the same time as their first day with kids in the classroom and online at the same time. The old saying that practice makes perfect applies to hybrid teaching, too. It took me several different setup attempts before I found one that worked best for me.

Speaking of setup, let's dive into what that looks like in my classroom. I am working off three total screens, between my laptop, a second monitor, and a Smartboard. But even at home in full remote, I work off two screens, which makes seeing my kids on Zoom while also sharing my screen with them possible. With the third screen, I can do the

same thing, while also keeping things like my email and grade book on the third screen without fear of accidentally sharing something private with everyone.

My district also purchased two different microphone options that we can use. One is a Lavalier microphone, similar to this one, with a 20-foot-long cord that plugs into the audio jack on the computer. The other one is similar to this one from Jabra, which serves as both a speaker and microphone that connects to the computer bluetooth. What I've found is that I don't like being attached to my computer with the Lavalier mic, and the microphone on the Jabra doesn't pick up my voice very well. I do, however, use the Jabra as a speaker, because with bluetooth, I can move it around the room with me to wherever I want to stand to teach.

Some purchases that I've made on my own have been life changers. I've had a wireless mouse for years, and two years ago, I purchased a wireless keyboard for myself. The biggest game-changer purchase for me was my own external webcam. I purchased this one from Amazon for $50, which serves as both a camera and also microphone. This has allowed me to detach from my computer and walk around my classroom and be more interactive with the in-person students, while allowing me to be heard easily by the students on Zoom. The microphone works so well that we have also used this webcam in the gym for remote basketball practices. In order to be able to plug in all of my devices, I also bought a USB hub, like this one, from Amazon.

One last thing that has worked well for connecting to students on Zoom while having students in person is still putting them in breakout rooms to collaborate on activities, and I use a pair of earbuds to check in with each room and have conversations. This allows me to connect with the remote students while also maintaining some privacy when needed. To keep that privacy, I am always careful to not say their names out loud for the students in the room to hear.

In closing, I want to remind you that you don't have to be perfect. There will be things that will work exactly as you planned and things that don't work at all. And there shouldn't be anything wrong with that. Try to not put too much pressure on yourself to be mistake-free. In fact, I think it is important for students to see us work through the challenges we are facing. If we want them to overcome adversity, they need to see us work through adversity as well.

Be confident. Have faith in yourself that you can do it. You've got this.

Connecting Both Groups of Students

Kyle Lawrence is a 6th grade social studies teacher and team leader at Lausanne Collegiate School in Memphis, Tenn.:

When I was told that my school would be teaching a hybrid model, my first question was the same as most: How?

My questions were quickly answered. Our students were placed into cohorts with each desk at minimum 6 feet apart. The teachers rotated to the students, and not the other way around, which is what we used to do. We were implementing a block schedule, so the students only had four classes per day with their cohort. We use Microsoft Teams as our communications platform. As a teacher, I invite my "in class" students to join our Teams meetings, but thankfully the school where I serve has large televisions that project everything I share on Teams. This gives our in-class students a bit of a break from their computers.

When teaching both remotely and in person, it is important to remember that there needs to be a sense of community between the students at home and the students in school.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I wanted to make sure that our students still felt like they were together, even when we were apart. Having several students in the classroom as well as at home, it was imperative to me to continue to create community amongst my 6th grade students. As a social studies teacher, I love assigning group work. I intentionally place students that are learning in person with students that are learning at home. My reasoning for doing this is to ensure that there are never any negative feelings for either of the groups toward the other.

I have learned, in my experience and from conversations with parents during parent-teacher conferences, that my students at home had a yearning for connecting with the students at school. Maybe it was the fear of missing out, or it could just be an intrinsic desire to stay connected to the students that are in the school. Regardless of the cause, I learned quite quickly that this was different from the spring, when everyone was in the same boat. Of the 60 students that I taught, at the beginning of the school year, we had 28 out of the 60 doing virtual learning, with 32 of the 60 on campus. This meant we had almost a 50/50 divide. Instead of allowing this to create division amongst our students, we as a 6th grade teaching team intentionally did things to create community with our students at home and in the classroom.

Every school day begins with a check-in with our virtual learners. We call our virtual learners individually to say good morning and just let them know we are here for them. This is something we get to do flippantly with students on campus, so we wanted our at-home learners to have the same experience. Another thing we have every day is a Daily Focus, which is a lesson that deals with social-emotional skills. This allows for a "check in" so to speak with our virtual students and on-campus students. It allows us, as teachers, the opportunity to have conversations about where we are in that moment— physically, emotionally, and academically.

Another thing I do with my students is build in "intentional team-building activities." If a classroom party is had, we make it to where at-home students can participate as easily as on-campus students. I have also established "Riddle Friday" lunches, where I share YouTube videos of riddles on Microsoft Teams with my at-home learners and in-person learners. We have also done Karaoke lunches as well as trivia lunches. We even made a class holiday card on Microsoft Teams! My intention was to ensure that everything I did in the classroom, including the special team-building events, were conducive to those learning at home. Although this does not alleviate all the concerns and those feelings of being left out that our at-home learners can feel, we have received great feedback from our parents from conferences. Both our at-home learners and our on-campus learners feel like they are a part of a classroom and a team.

'Soft-Start Routines'

Caroline Shearer teaches 7th grade ELA in Hershey, Pa., and this year, she has been teaching mostly in a concurrent hybrid and virtual livestreaming environment. You can find her on Twitter @CarolineLehman, and she is a member of both the Pennsylvania Council of Teachers of English (PCTELA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE):

Transitioning from fully remote to concurrent teaching is a challenge. Concurrent teaching is not a long-term solution; it is exhausting, and I understand it as a strategy to get us through the pandemic. I have focused on trying one new thing at a time and taking it week by week. I hope you find something useful in my Do's and Don'ts to get you started.

Do Share and Collaborate

Nothing is easy right now, and it's best not to go it alone. I work with my ELA PLC and core-subject team every day, and one of the greatest helps has been having our instructional coach, Dr. Donna Spangler, to support us. She has offered support, strategies, and a newsletter that collects ideas from around the building that has been a window into what's working in other classrooms. I recommend reaching out to your colleagues to share what's working and to ask for help!

Do Build in Soft-Start Routines

Pre-Covid 19, it was important for middle school students to have predictable routines. It still is. I made soft starts a priority after reading how Sarah K. Ahmed describes how she used them in her classroom to Harvey "Smokey" Daniels in their book *Upstanders: how to engage middle school hearts and minds with inquiry*. During soft starts, students can get ready by taking a brain break, reading independently, choosing books, or free writing. This year, having these routines has become essential, and it's also when I figure out attendance and let students into Zoom and the physical room. Attendance needs to be precise in case we need to provide information for contact tracing.

To make attendance streamlined, I ask students to display their last names first on Zoom to alphabetize the list. I also use this time to send emails to students who haven't shown up yet. Using a standard subject line like "ELA: You're Invited to Attend!" saves time, and I insert an image of our schedule. Taking five minutes for attendance and kids getting settled in has been an important and predictable part of our routine.

Do Make Finding Resources Easy for Both Groups

If you've been teaching remotely, you already have a way to get links and materials to all students. I send out a daily morning announcement through Canvas with our schedule and a link to that day's agenda. During class, I also turn any needed links into QR codes I project and I copy/paste the link into the chat for Zoomers. For middle schoolers, the more access points, the better!

Don't Expect Timing to Be the Same

It's taking more time than when we were all remote for both groups of students to do tasks and work in groups together, but it's also worth it. When surveyed, students most wanted more opportunities to interact. The following things are helpful when asking a mixed group to work in breakout rooms:

- Students in the room can join Zoom with headphones to avoid noise interference.
- Assign group roles like facilitator, recorder, speaker, and timekeeper. Having a role has made students feel more comfortable on Zoom.
- Give students a common document to work on to bridge both groups of students. Using Google Slides or Google Docs will let you see who is participating.

Don't Expect Perfection...Because It Doesn't Exist Concurrently

In the remote setting, you've already had to navigate issues and problem-solve. Concurrently, it feels like every day there is a new surprise or snag, so you can't expect perfection. Ask students for help. Be honest. Take a deep breath. Turn your technology on and off again. Students can see how hard this is, and we can model how to fail gracefully and grow from it. I've learned along with my students that all we can control is how we react.

I am also creating a [Twitter list including all contributors to this column](#).