

GEORGE LUCAS EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION



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**TEACHER WELLNESS****Teaching Through a Pandemic: A Mindset for This Moment**

Hundreds of teachers, many of them operating in countries where teach-from-home has been in place for weeks, weigh in on the mental approach you need to stay grounded in this difficult time.

**By** *Stephen Merrill*

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The thought ended almost before it started: “This is so overwhelming.” It was all one teacher managed to type before she stopped short, vexed into silence, perhaps, by the sheer size of the problem. In the pregnant pause that followed, undoubtedly, every teacher tracking the unspooling thread—about the dizzying, rapidly escalating viral crisis that was closing schools across the country—recognized the chasm they were all facing as well, and scrambled to fill in the blank.

In the next few hours, over 500 teachers joined two Facebook conversations about teaching during the coronavirus pandemic, spilling out their concerns and anxieties: What will we do if the schools close for months? How can I shift to online learning if we’re closing tomorrow, or even in a few hours? How will special education students be cared for, and IEPs administered? What about children who have no internet access, or who will be required, as Keith Schoch thoughtfully noted, to “become de facto babysitters” for their brothers and sisters. “There is no digital divide, but there is a digital abyss, and America’s rural poor are living at the bottom of it,” said Anne Larsen, with devastating concision. What if, in the end, the school systems decide that online learning is working just fine, and never reopen?

The panic was all perfectly understandable.

But there were plenty of teachers in the mix who had weeks of crisis experience under their belts by that time—several in Hong Kong and Italy and the state of Washington, for example—and others who had long careers in online and distance learning. In the end, too, there were many fantastic, highly creative teachers providing strategies as fast as the obstacles appeared.

At the highest level, a shift in mindset would be required—even the most optimistic educators conceded the point. There are plenty of strategies and tactics we’re covering at Edutopia—and we’ll continue to—but here are the crucial emotional and psychological scaffolds that our audience agreed would be needed to teach in this new paradigm.

### **EXPECT TRIAL... AND PLENTY OF ERROR**

Start by being reasonable with yourself. It is, in fact, impossible to shift to distance learning overnight without lots of trial and error. Expect it, plan for it, and do your best to make peace with it.

“I can tell you, now that we’re in week 7 of online learning, that much of what you will do will be trial and error,” wrote Stacy Rausch Keevan, who was teaching in Hong Kong. “Don’t stress about that—it won’t do you any good. For my middle school English and humanities classes, I’m offering the same lessons I would normally do live, but in smaller doses.”

### **ACKNOWLEDGE THE EXTRAORDINARY**

Reset your baseline. We’re all operating in the shadow of a global pandemic, and it is disorienting and limiting. Business as usual is unrealistic.

The real “points to consider” are not “the strict adherence to ‘regular’ conditions and norms,” wrote Amy Rheault-Heafield in a reply to a question about how to structure distance learning like more typical learning experiences, “but how to provide a rich experience to all learners who are now without ‘traditional’ teachers standing beside them in classes.”

So while you should try to provide “meaningful activities,” cautioned elementary teacher John Thomas, “we should remember that on short notice—and because many of us have limited PD utilizing these tools—we can’t tackle everything immediately. In other words, we should give ourselves the time and the permission to figure this out.”

## **REDUCE THE WORKLOAD (FOR YOURSELF AND YOUR STUDENTS)**

If your district allows it, you should plan to do less. Students won’t be able to work as productively, anyway—so if you can’t scale back you’ll be sending them work they cannot do—and your own life and family need added care.

“Feedback from students and families over the last 10 days in Italy is ‘less is more,’” commented Jo Gillespie. “Consider that parents are trying to work from home, and siblings are vying for computer and Wi-Fi time. Try Google quizzes using Forms, a reading log, some short live sessions with teachers and classmates, maybe vocabulary extension, maths and geometry problems (but not too many). And that’s probably enough.”

And Keevan, the teacher in Hong Kong with weeks of experience, confirmed that time and distance play funny games during a crisis: “What would normally take you one class period to teach in the classroom will probably take you twice as long.”

## **NO PERSON IS AN ISLAND**

Humans are social animals. Working from home, or worse, from quarantine, is isolating and often depressing for both teachers and students.

Make a concerted effort to speak to other colleagues and trusted professionals to provide emotional and psychological context to your work. Teaching at this moment is extraordinarily hard, and you'll need the virtual company of people who are experiencing what you are.

And don't forget to "reach out to students as often as you can," said Keevan, who still teaches classes live despite a (slightly inconvenient!) 13-hour time difference. Or you can facilitate peer-to-peer communication. John Thomas assigns pen pals in his first- and second-grade classes, so that kids with no internet can feel like they belong.

### **EVERYONE THINKS THEY CAN'T—BEFORE THEY CAN**

Some degree of pessimism and self-doubt comes with the territory. Teachers in the Facebook thread advised more perspective-taking and being more patient with yourself: You know how to teach, and you will figure this out in time.

"We are in week 7 and I have three children of my own at home," wrote Salecia Host, a teacher in Tianjin, China, reflecting on the arc of her emotional response to the crisis. "Just take it day by day. It gets less overwhelming and more routine."

Try to remain calm—though you'll have a few moments where that goes out the window—and keep plugging away: "Being open-minded and flexible is key," said Kaz Wilson, who also works in China. "Everyone thinks you can't until you pause, talk it out with folks who are doing it, and know that you'll get through it."

### **MIND THE GAP**

Your work will be hard, but there are students facing more severe challenges. Students with no internet or no computer will need support, as will those with learning differences or other circumstances that make distance learning especially difficult. Supporting these students was on almost everyone’s mind—it came up dozens of times in the Facebook thread.

“I’m in Italy. Our schools closed a few weeks ago without any previous warning. We shifted to online immediately. It is hard and exhausting,” admitted Eleonora Borromeo, before providing a ray of hope. “Equity is an issue. Assessment is an issue. But the students are doing their best and giving us the strength to go on.”

Solutions from our audience of teachers focused on the old analog approaches: paper-and-pencil tasks, workbooks and activity packets that can be mailed home, and updating parents and students via phone calls daily.

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