

What is a Good Day for me in Distance Learning?



As I pour the hot coffee my partner prepared into my travel-friendly thermos, I think about whether today is an odd block or even block. Either way, I'm off to a good start: before the pandemic, neither of us had the time in the mornings to brew our own coffee during the week, but now that he is working from home, it is a daily treat for me. Today is Thursday, which means it's the first day I see my even periods. I haven't seen them since last Friday; do they even remember what the lesson topic was? Have they checked their messages? I sent a Remind a few days prior, trying my best to adhere to my own rule of no messages to students longer than 25 words. Any instructions longer than that and my engagement drops by the dozens.

I make my 20-minute drive to campus, where I park in the lot that affords me the longest walk to my classroom. Another morning treat. I won't be walking much the rest of the day. I linger in the car listening to the morning news from the radio, again feeling guilty for not replacing the news feed with a more spiritual or informative podcast. I mask up, reserving putting my second mask on until I get to my classroom—rather, “the” classroom that I work from.

I make my walk across campus towards the front office to get screened. As I make

my way up the stairs, I give my usual “No and no” to Tracy, who need not repeat the COVID-19 screening questions because, at this point, I’ve heard them almost a hundred times from her. Once for each day I attend campus. I pick up my attendance sheet from the secretary. As I place the small sticker indicating today’s date on my more-casual-than-usual work outfit, I scan the list of 15 students assigned to me. Pretty identical list to the day before. I walk up to the classroom, formerly “my” classroom.

The classroom I work in is sterile now. Literally and figuratively. Before the nightly sanitation procedures, back in May, I removed all my possessions as directed by administration. To leave the room as empty of our personal items as possible. No posters on representation in science. No bulletin board of pictures and “thank-you” cards from my previous students. And the roomy, large group tables were replaced by a dozen and a half individual desks with the built-in armrest to the right side, each spaced six feet apart as determined by the “x” marks of tape on the beige tile floor. I let the students in, but not before propping the door open and switching on the HEPA filter in the middle of the room.

“Good morning!!” I say enthusiastically, as six or seven students walk into the room to log into their 8:30 a.m. class. I take the chance early every morning to set a positive and excited tone to the day. It’s been about three months now that we’ve been “podded” together. My school established learning pods mid-November in response to the need for students to have a stable place to work from during distance learning. I volunteered in December—with about two dozen other teachers at my large, public urban high school in southern California—to be a pod teacher, taking on the additional responsibility of assisting the attending students with their online coursework by helping them clarify instructions, catch up on missing work, and generally maintain a healthy attitude towards school.

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didn't necessarily envision a 6.5 hour day of sitting in the same, hard-backed desk logged in and plugged into back-to-back virtual class sessions.

The day I started to win these little humans over, I think, was the day (about six weeks into learning pods) that I started bringing cup noodles as an alternative to their school lunch, which is delivered daily at 12:30 p.m. One day, after about eight weeks of being in a pod, I realized we needed more fun, so I played an episode of "The Simpsons" on the projector during lunch. We laughed. It was probably the first time we laughed together.

One day, I asked students to use a whiteboard that I propped next to each of their desks to keep track of their assignments, and four of them obliged. After a week of pushing that system, one student decided to stop attending the learning pods. I called home and guardians suggested that their student was too depressed to come to campus.

I don't blame him. I think many students, when they heard about an opportunity to "come to campus" for school, didn't necessarily envision a 6.5 hour day of sitting in the same, hard-backed desk logged in and plugged into back-to-back virtual class sessions, roomed with a handful of other students they may not necessarily share a class with and an adult that may not necessarily be one of their teachers on record. But we've learned to make the best of it.

My learning pod shares a group chat in Microsoft Teams. When I renamed the group chat as "Minjares' Learning Pod 303," one of them renamed it "Minjares' Chaos Pod 303." One day they showed me how to download Minecraft on my school-provided laptop, and collectively gave me a tutorial on what I could do in

“creative mode.” They started assigning themselves jobs as they observed, day after day, that I would spray and wipe down their desks as I dismissed them at 3:15 p.m. As the weeks passed, I didn’t have to nag too much to get them to update their to-do list on their individual whiteboards on a daily basis. Then, one day, one of the students created a Jeopardy-style game board filled with a combination of Pokemon trivia and trivia about our learning pod, like “How many students have been in the pod?” (the answer was 13), and “Who’s job is it to spray the tables?” (the answer was Lupe), and “What is something special that Ms. M has in her room?” (the answer was a microwave).

Meanwhile, I’ve made little progress in building connections with my roster of “virtual” students. On my best days, I start class with a meme or joke that at most three to four students will react to. I use PearDeck religiously, and I jump for joy when I can get 50 percent of those logged into the Teams meeting *also* logged into the PearDeck.

I start virtual lessons by asking check-in questions like, “What are you grateful for today?” and “What’s a motivational quote that inspired you?” On good days, I can move through a demonstration of a skill efficiently enough to have time to prompt them to show examples of their work live. I get to give immediate feedback and move at a pace that matches where they are. I usually do this by having them draw a diagram or construct an evidence-based explanation on PearDeck. By that point, about 20 to 30 minutes after the start of the live virtual session, I’m excited to have 10 students (out of 30 logged in) to show examples of their work so I can formatively assess.

After a 45-minute attempt at sharing my excitement for physics learning and students’ science ideas, I say something like “well, that’s our time for today . . .” and sometimes, rarely, I’ll notice the participants number instantly drop by one. I remind students what is due as evidence of learning for the day and post a link in the chat, in addition to having it embedded on the PearDeck slide. I tell them I love them, and that I hope they have a wonderful rest of the day because they deserve it. I’ve been speaking to a silent set of blank screens, some with really cute avatars or filtered pictures, for about 45 minutes. I click “End Recording” and proceed to paste the recording link to the Canvas home page, under the section called “Did you miss the LIVE session?” On a good day, my bilingual interpreter will chime in and remind the students to send us messages when they need help.

On a good day, I'll check Canvas to find that seven students submitted the assignment that during the 45-minute live session, I painstakingly explained, re-explained, and explained again in Spanish, with all oral instructions, succinctly (25 words or less) transcribed into the Teams chat and embedded the four-minute pre-recorded Loom video with instructions and examples. The moderator tab tells me another four students have the assignment opened on their browser. That's better than zero!

After the live session ends, I add my second layer of mask, pick up a pencil to use as a pointer, and pace around the room to ask if the learning pod students need anything. I might also bring a piece of paper with me with the message "What are you supposed to be doing right now?" that I can point to as I walk up to them and they're still logged into a live class lesson.

Lunchtime on a good day means that I get to see each of the learning pod students go outside and sit in direct sunlight, within the designated bounds, of course. During lunch, another learning pod teacher on campus and I bend the rules so that we can have a physically distanced social break. We've accepted the risks.

I understand why community members have been anxious about "reopening" schools. In my opinion, this is a misnomer because for many schools, campuses have been open, and for all schools, teachers are carrying out our service as best we can, given the circumstances and the lack of control over the learning environment. What I'm finding in my good days are evidence of human connection. When I connect with my learning pod students, when I can connect with my virtual students, I am rewarded with the feeling that the work I am doing is not in vain. If I can share some of myself, and get concrete proof that they related to what I said or frankly even *heard* me, I feel pretty good about the day.

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