

Tips to teaching remotely: focus on essentials, less is more

The temptation to do it all as if it is possible to maintain the pace and volume of contact education remotely must be resisted, an education expert says.



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“As educators adapt to teaching remotely and online, there may be an attempt to mimic what a school day would normally look like, by filling learners’ days according to pre-lockdown timetables, and pace and content of learning,” says Dr Felicit Coughlan, Academic Director at ADvTech, South African private education provider.

“However, this approach is counter-productive and can lead to further frustration, anxiety and tension under what is already challenging circumstances for all concerned, including for parents, learners and educators,” she says.

Essential skills

Coughlan says there is an important difference between focusing on essential skills during this time, as opposed to trying keep the curriculum going in full.

“Much of the stress people are experiencing arises from this well-intentioned attempt to ‘keep up’. It is far more conducive learning and well-being to make deliberate choices and to pare back and focus on those skills around which we can then build content knowledge again later,” she says.

In quite unexpected ways, the lockdown and the unique and unprecedented circumstances in which we now find ourselves provide a perfect opportunity to develop and entrench those global competencies which otherwise might not receive the requisite focus during normal school time, Coughlan says.

“We have known for some time that the world is changing, that the skills required in the workplace are evolving and that the workplace of the future is going to look much different from what used to be the status quo only four weeks ago. Now, all of a sudden, we find ourselves thrown into a completely new paradigm and it is quite clear that the world will not be the same.

“So what better time to develop those global competencies and master 21st Century Skills than during the biggest global disaster in recent history?”

Coughlan says SA teachers have risen to the challenges of remote and digital teaching with remarkable resilience and zeal with very little warning or lead-time. They have been wonderfully innovative whether or not they have had access to extensive educational technology or been required to use WhatsApp or other day-to-day communication tools to keep in touch with children they were teaching. The mindset of making do and re-inventing is a precious one we should not lose.

Global competencies

She says that those schools and educators who have not yet had the time to integrate Global Competencies in their curricula, or have treated these as peripheral, now have the perfect opportunity to embed them in “normal” teaching and learning.

“The world of the future just came crashing through our door,” says Coughlan.

The Global Competencies of THINKING skills (creative, critical and reflexive), RESEARCH skills (collecting, recording, organising, interpreting), COMMUNICATION skills (personal interaction with others), SOCIAL skills (personal behaviour) and SELF-MANAGEMENT are the only ways that teachers and students will navigate this period and what follows it, successfully.

Focus on the basics

“So, for teachers developing lessons and content, and schools still grappling with how to approach learning at this time, consider that less really is more. If there is therefore a little bit of a silver lining to this disaster, it is that we now have the opportunity to develop these skills, and that even those schools and educators who are not as well-positioned as others can include them.”

Now is the time to focus on the basics, and to aim for consolidation, says Coughlan.

“It is true that for some this is easier than for others. There is particular concern about the Grade 12 class as well as the millions of children being left behind as education continues for some. These social justice imperatives are not trivial, but are not addressed by the entire system freezing. It is, however, vital that those in positions of privilege who are able to still be learning effectively acknowledge this privilege with humility.

“If your school or class can continue learning then this time needs to be used to develop global citizens just as much as it must be used to entrench skills. Content can and will follow. Don’t mistake quantity for quality.”

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