

NEW CHALK TALK

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Literacies Teachers Need During Covid-19 By *Maha Bali, Center for Learning and Teaching*

What are teachers' priorities during the Covid-19 global pandemic that has forced almost the entire world to close educational institutions and move to emergency remote/online teaching?

I come to this question from the perspective of someone who has been working in the field of online and blended learning for over 18 years now, one who has supported my institution, the American University in Cairo, in its efforts to move teaching online during the crisis (see <http://www.aucgypt.edu/online-instruction>), and one who is watching her 8-year old learn online for the first time.

Teachers need digital literacies, not just digital skills. It's not about learning all the tools, but about being mindful of how to use which tool for the right purpose at the right time, and knowing when NOT to use the more complicated technology and instead just sending an email or making a phone call.

I want to suggest that we need to go beyond focusing on how to achieve our learning outcomes with technology and modify our assessments for an online environment. Maybe we should focus on less tangible values that are way more important.

5 Things We Can All Do...

Well-being/care literacy

As teachers, we need to care about our students' well-being; some will be directly affected by illness, or have loved ones affected by it. Some will be economically harmed in the short or long term. Some will have additional family responsibilities. Almost all are affected by the physical isolation measures and lack of human contact. Many are stressed by the news and the threat of the virus.

Teachers are also probably facing additional home responsibilities and need to care for themselves in order to care for others. We are also probably not functioning at our best because of the cognitive load of this crisis/trauma. While I seem pretty functional most days (at work, at home), I am not always OK inside. Some of the most heartwarming experiences I have had during this crisis have been faculty members calling to check on me after three weeks of intensive support I'd been giving them; and my students forgave me for being late in grading them, when I told them I'd gotten overwhelmed and just could not do it. They were reciprocating my own understanding of their various circumstances. I was grateful.

Equity literacy

We need to remind ourselves that treating everyone the same way as an attempt to be fair does not achieve equity for all. One approach to teaching or assessment can privilege one group of learners while disadvantaging another. One way to help us think through this is to give choices and different pathways for students. For more information on what this means, see the Universal Design for Learning Guidelines developed by the nonprofit CAST.

Socioemotional literacy online

The physical distancing put in place to halt the spread of the novel coronavirus means many of us have higher socioemotional needs than usual, and as teachers, we need to learn how to use online spaces not just to communicate, but to create social spaces—socioemotional literacy.

One of the ways I find helps do this is to create semi-formal spaces for semi-synchronous communication, such as WhatsApp, Slack or Twitter hashtags and groups. Places where someone can pose a question or comment and probably someone in the group can respond quickly but others can see it later and join in. Spaces where we can share jokes or memes or find someone to share a sad or happy moment with. Places that feel like a café on campus where we sometimes meet someone and sit down for a few minutes. We need to find ways to build community among learners and build personal relationships with individual students even if we can't see them. Or at least encourage young people to create their own.

Workload literacy

This one seems to be a difficult one. How can teachers maintain an awareness of how much of a workload something seems to students online? This workload calculator made me realize how we need to ask ourselves a lot when we imagine workload. It is not just the number of pages in a reading task, but also considerations like is the content new to students, cognitively challenging, what do we expect them to do with it? Additionally, we need to think about what else students may be dealing with this week and how we can help them learn to manage their time while stressed.

Openness/Sharing Literacy

Teachers who are good at this will be finding the move online much easier. By openness literacy, I mean the ability and willingness to:

- Use or adapt already freely available material by other educators instead of starting from scratch (i.e. Open Educational Resources).
- Create and share their own educational material with others within their institutions or beyond.
- Reach out to others for help online, whether within their own circles or on social media.
- Share their own processes, failures and successes online, such as on social media or a blog or even a departmental mailing list or WhatsApp group.

... and 3 Things Some of Us Can Do

Humanizing/authenticity literacy

Can you be your whole authentic human self-online and help your students be, too? More than anything, when we make ourselves vulnerable online, be fully human, it helps our students be the same with us. We cannot model perfection or show only one side of our professional selves and expect students to be comfortable being themselves with us. People sometimes hear or see my child during classes or webinars. It can be distracting, but everyone is at home, and it can happen to anyone, and it's OK. I know not everyone is comfortable with this. Whatever your comfort level, when teaching online, try to take a small step beyond it to be more accessible as a human being to your students.

Cultural responsiveness

I would generally just say responsiveness to students. This includes keeping our finger on the pulse of how students are feeling, what they're thinking, and how it connects to what's happening in the real world, then finding ways to integrate it into one's teaching in authentic ways. Finding ways to encourage students to bring their home cultures to the classroom, integrate it and both appreciate and critique it while learning about other cultures, too.

The original work on cultural responsiveness comes from African American educators such as Gloria Ladson-Billings' Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.

Big picture literacy

We need to find ways to bring the big picture of what is happening in the world around us into our classroom. This may be easier for some courses than others, of course. But even if we can't do it in ways relevant to the course itself, we can still find a few minutes to have candid conversations with students about what's happening in their lives besides education.

None of This Is New

These ideas are all related, of course. A lot of them are part of critical pedagogy, centering social justice, empathy, and the importance of looking at education as a way of being in the world and not just a spectator sport... All these literacies are relevant offline and beyond Covid-19, but they are so important to prioritize right now, and we have not prepared teachers for all this. This is not "business as usual" and we should not pretend otherwise.

Can you think of other literacies teachers need to live and learn in these times? Please email me on bali@aucegypt.edu