

Teaching Remotely During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Social Education Staff

This past March, schools across the country were forced almost overnight to shut their doors in an urgent effort to slow the spread of the deadly Coronavirus (Covid-19). Within weeks or even days, teachers scrambled to move their classes online, and schools rushed to ensure that students had Internet access and computers. For this May/June issue of Social Education, we reached out to several social studies educators via e-mail and asked them about this sudden change from classroom to distance learning. These are their responses.

How would you describe your transition to remote teaching so far?



Kim Heckart, Grade Three, Prairie Ridge Elementary, Cedar Rapids, Iowa: The transition to remote learning has been a learning curve for both my students and myself. My school district granted permission to meet virtually for class meetings on Google Meets before we began actually teaching online. (This was when we thought we would be able to return to school.) This allowed my students and myself some sessions online to figure out the technology, set expectations for the mute button, chat box, and other etiquettes of the online platform before moving to learning online.



Jennifer Reiter, Grade Three, Gilman Lower School, Baltimore, Maryland: It's been a challenge to be sure. In many ways, I feel like I am a first-year teacher all over again. Being at a private school, we don't have a district to create materials for us, so we are all working to move all of our instruction online. We closed for Spring Break and moved to online instruction as soon as Spring Break was over. I would say that we are getting the hang of it and are trying hard to both stay connected and present a new and interesting curriculum.



Jennifer Ingold, Bay Shore Middle School, Bay Shore, New York: The transition has been an ongoing process. Even though my students were well acquainted with the Google Suite and other platforms I am currently using, it has been a challenge to create the same type of dynamic.



Zackary Seitz, Social Studies Teacher at Wylie High School in Wylie, Texas: My transition to online teaching has been pretty smooth. I am lucky that I work in a district that had a clear plan from the beginning about what online learning would look like and what teacher expectations were. Any kinks were worked out quickly. The hardest part has been not being able to see my students on a daily basis, which makes reaching out to students who are struggling or not turning in assignments more difficult and time-consuming.



April Francis, Director of Student Life, Mamaroneck School District, Westchester, New York: The Coronavirus pandemic has truly been an impactful experience as an educator. As a former classroom social studies teacher and now teacher leader, I have found that the transition to remote learning created more of a challenge for me. Why do I say this? Well, not having an assigned group of students, I had to adapt from a role that was very people oriented and translate that to an online environment. In my role as the Director of Student Life, I work with teachers in adapting culturally responsive skills in their classroom, and I work with students in building safe environments to support their social emotional well being. When our district switched to remote learning, I had to think outside the box as to how I could still fulfill my role. I wanted to ensure I stayed in contact with my most vulnerable students to be a support as they navigated this new world.



Christine Hitchcock, Indiana University High School: I teach students who attend a private online high school, so there was no transition. Our

requirements (computer or laptop, high speed internet, etc.) are clear to students before they enroll in our courses.

Do your students seem to be adapting?

Kim Heckart: I am an elementary teacher. In my district, online classes in grades K-8 are voluntary, but in grades 9–12 they are mandatory (because high schoolers had already been working with one-on-one devices—one school-provided device for every student—and already knew the digital platform). K-8 students are not required to attend online meetings or complete work for online classes at this time. For elementary schools, my district has required one class meeting, a reading lesson, and a math lesson to be recorded and sent to families every week. I have found that when I am present (synchronously) teaching the lesson, I have more participation than when I just send a link to the lesson. Students at this age miss their classmates and don't have other social media that allow them to connect with friends, so they enjoy seeing and interacting with each other online in our sessions. I have set consistent times each day (Monday-Friday) for both reading and math, and I have choice boards that are activities for social studies, science, reading, writing, math, mindfulness, and random acts of kindness—which kids can do when they aren't with me online.

When I meet with students, we spend the first 15 minutes at our class meeting, where we do a morning circle, chat pack activity (gives kids a chance to talk), and student highlights (I share things kids are doing on their BINGO choice board). They share pictures, videos, or verbally share what they have been working on. They love this and it motivates them to want to do things and share with the class. On Fridays, we have a meeting when they choose something fun to do to celebrate learning for the week. (Show and tell, pet sharing, Pictionary, Math Fact Bingo, etc.)

Jennifer Reiter: Yes, though they constantly bemoan the fact that we aren't together in school. They miss their friends and teachers, but they are finding some silver linings. Some enjoy the more independent pace of the work, some enjoy not being in dress code, and some enjoy sleeping in a bit later. They are quickly becoming adept at navigating multiple online platforms and, for the most part, are continuing to work hard.

Jennifer Ingold: They are adapting and many are doing well. Some of their work comes in regularly, others more sporadically, but the trick has been to find that personal connection in a digital world that is vital to every student's success.

Zackary Seitz: Overall I would say that the students have done an incredible job at adapting to this sudden shift.

April Francis: Two groups I was most concerned about were

Third Grade BINGO! Week 6 How many BINGO's can YOU get this week?!				
Literacy	Math	Social Studies	Science	Mindfulness
Poems to Read	Perimeter Ladder Game	Kid Citizen: What are Primary Sources?	How to Spread a Seed 1. Sort out all of seeds. 2. Get paper lunch-tubed seeds in to the 1/2 cup. 3. Show an old the sprout. 4. Check back over the week to keep sprout track out. 5. Show for 1/2 weeks.	Cosmic Kids YouTube Channel
Wonderopolis	Math Bingo Game (choose operation) Or Freckle	Kid Citizen: Congress and Child Labor	Earth Day Mystery Science: How Old is the Earth?	Mindful Coloring Animal Sheets
ReadWorks.org	Factor/Div Multiplication Scribe Multiplication	Kid Citizen: Welcome to Congress	Mount La Science	Hidden Pictures
Wonders.com (week 6)	Checkers on the Move Perimeter Board Game	Kid Citizen: Base Parks	Base of Spring BINGO	How to Spread a Seed Ladder

those in the My Brother's Keeper (www.nysed.gov/mbk) and My Sister's Keeper programs (an example of this program in New York City is <https://nycmbk.org/nyc-my-sisters-keeper/>); these groups were developed to support historically marginalized students that were struggling in our school environment. When we were required to stay home, many group members reached out to ask if we were still going to meet somehow. Due to their eagerness, I quickly adapted to virtual meetings with them. When we were in school, we met once a month, but due to the need for more intense social emotional support because of the pandemic, I decided to meet once a week. It truly has been a great support, not just for the students, but for my co-advisor and I. We look forward to our weekly 45-minute sessions of checking in, playing Kahoot games, and our pizza raffle. We even added a "Netflix and Hang" virtual group once a week, where students can watch a children-friendly show together, chat in the chat room, and then have a post-discussion about the themes we saw in the episode. Remote learning has been rewarding in that sense.

Are you encountering equity issues because some students are not able to participate online?

Kim Heckart: I have anywhere from 15-18 out of 20 who are joining me online each day. I call families each week to check in and see what they need from me, or from the district. During the first week, our district asked teachers to reach out and ask which families needed school supplies, technology, and Internet access. All families in the district have been given devices. At this point, parents decide whether they want their children to be online.

Jennifer Reiter: In a private school, there is an expectation that the families are able to provide Internet access for the students during the regular school year. Our students who

receive financial aid are provided what they need to be able to do online homework assignments at home.

For us, the largest equity differences have been in terms of family support. Many of our families work in healthcare or are working from home, and are just not able to facilitate their students' participation to the extent that other families are. We are seeing a huge difference of support that students are receiving.

Jennifer Ingold: There are always going to be challenges associated with this. I have applauded my district's approach to this particular issue. We have had a district-wide initiative in all buildings where families can come and basically "sign-out" Chromebooks that are set up for them.

Zackary Seitz: I am fortunate to work in a district that has the money and resources to help reduce inequities among students. With what the district can control, it has done a great job of reaching out to students and parents and providing Wi-Fi hotspots, and connecting people with Internet service providers offering free service during this time. The district has also stated that students can come up to the parking lot and access the school Wi-Fi to complete their work. However, I think this pandemic has exposed tech equity issues, primarily that access to high-speed Internet should be a right and that as educators we need to be aware of these and other tech equity issues going forward when we assign homework and projects.

April Francis: The quick shift to remote learning brought to light harsh inequities of our society. Many of the students in my support groups did not have the same resources as some of their classmates. Our district quickly provided students in need with a Chromebook or iPad. Yet, even with access to a device, home environment inequities still prove to be a huge hurdle for some of our most vulnerable students. Some students have to babysit during the day while parents work. Some students have very full households and finding a quiet space isn't possible. To support students who have varying home life obstacles, I began to arrange tutoring sessions. This has helped me to develop some true bonds with students that I hope continue to grow even after this pandemic is over.

What arrangements have been made for students who were not able to participate online?

Kim Heckart: The students who have not joined me online are

offered weekly paper/pencil activities and school supplies (if needed) that match the online lessons. They can be picked up at lunch sites every day. If a family doesn't have transportation, we have staff members who deliver them.

Jennifer Reiter: The school arranged for the students to be able to come to school to pick up devices if needed.

Jennifer Ingold: The district has been very diligent in trying to ensure that student access for families in our community is not an issue. As I mentioned, we have had a district-wide initiative where families can come and basically "sign-out" Chromebooks that are set up for them. We have a talented team of technological experts at the district level that have worked tirelessly to iron out as many kinks as they can with Wi-Fi and network issues to ensure that all families are informed and have access. As problems continue to arise, they are dealt with immediately and information is expedited throughout the district to faculty, staff, families, and the community.

Zackary Seitz: There have been arrangements made to get the work to students via delivery by a school employee, but because of the steps that our school and district have taken, only a handful of students require this delivery. We are also a 1:1 school with students having already received a Chromebook to complete assignments, so students at least have access to that computer.

Have you and your teaching colleagues shared ideas for teaching remotely?

Kim Heckart: My district had Professional Learning Communities prior to the pandemic, and we have continued to meet online to plan and develop how to meet the needs of our families, students, and help each other. Staff members all have a school-issued computer. Our administrative team continues to determine the direction for our district as we learn more from our governor. We have weekly staff meetings to give us updates and determine next steps of the process as they unfold.

Jennifer Reiter: Yes. Isn't that where the best professional development comes from? We informally have shared lots of ways to provide both content and maintain relationships with students. We are now on week six of distance learning, and are just [now] being offered more formal professional development from the school. But I believe this more formal approach still

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relies on peers teaching peers about what is working for them.

Jennifer Ingold: Part of our approach to expediting digital learning has been ongoing access to high quality online professional development opportunities. These PD workshops and sessions are run by a collection of talented staff members, on every level and from every curriculum background. They regularly share their expertise—from beginner and basic sessions on Google Suite, all the way up to Virtual Ed Camp. This has helped us all to stay connected as a learning community.

Zackary Seitz: Yes, we have communicated and discussed wise practices for teaching online this quickly. I think that the most important consideration that teachers are having is that everyone is trying to survive and get through the school year. If this style of teaching has to continue into the fall, then I am sure that there will be more work done to collaborate and improve on our online teaching practices.

What teaching strategies have you found most effective?

Kim Heckart: The most effective strategies are the same strategies I used when in the classroom. Understanding the Hierarchy of Needs is key. Allowing students to feel safe and have their basic needs met is first and foremost. If this isn't happening, they can't learn. This is why we are checking in with families once a week.

Another is building relationships with students. This allows respect to be a two-way street. It helps with classroom management both online and in person. Next, we set expectations so the kids know what learning is in this new normal, even when it is voluntary.

I have always read aloud stories to my students, and continue to do this each day online. I choose books from the lists of Notable Social Studies Trade Books (www.socialstudies.org/publications/notables), which allow me to connect literacy and social studies. We've had great discussions (even if it is through writing in the chat box or taking turns unmuting the mic and speaking in turn). Then I point out things on their BINGO board where they can dig deeper into topics that I am reading about.

Another important thing to navigate for me was the platform, and the best way to share what I am teaching. I always record whatever I am reading aloud or the lesson I am teaching ahead of time on YouTube. I use my own YouTube channel and made all the settings private for just my class, and Google Meets also has a way to record yourself teaching. It allows you to record your screen and yourself at the same time.

It allows me to make a practice run before teaching it to my class. The recordings are all sent to all my students in case someone isn't able to meet with me for the lesson.

Jennifer Reiter: We've found great success with apps that give students a voice, particularly FlipGrid (<https://info.flipgrid.com/>). Having the boys [Gilman is a lower school for boys] be able to see each other and leave feedback for one another has been terrific. We are running a "help desk" through FlipGrid as well, where the students can leave questions and teachers can respond with the needed information. Several parents have

shared that this makes the kids feel like they are not so alone. For delivering content, I'm particularly enjoying using Nearpod (<https://nearpod.com/>). I can create interactive lessons for the boys, add video and narration, and share it with them asynchronously so they can learn in their own time.

As for community, we are, along with a lot of people, using Zoom class meetings a few times a week. We are tapping into our resource teachers to help with these so that they can also continue to feel connected with the students.

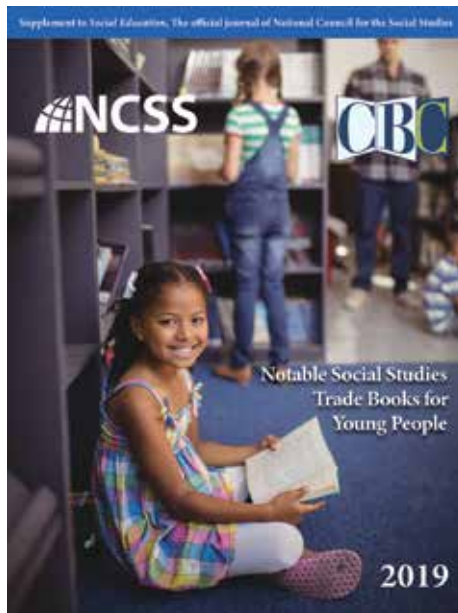
Jennifer Ingold: Simplicity and familiarity. Virtual classroom structure can be designed to be *simple and familiar*, so that it would be easily adaptable for distance learning needs of all students.

Students in every one of my sections were already utilizing both my website (<http://jingold.weebly.com/>) and Google Classroom (tech-based platforms), so they were familiar with how to both access and complete their work within them.

After I had my classroom structure established, it came down to creating learning experiences for students that had an element of personalization in them. I wanted students to continue to connect with the curriculum, but also find relevancy with our current situation in the outside world. So I developed the activity, "Survivor: Quarantine Edition," a series of primary source experiences that allow students to personally connect with and experience history (<http://jingold.weebly.com/survivor-quarantine-edition-new.html>). It is turning out to be the ultimate game of student empowerment that connects knowledge, history, and humanity.

Zackary Seitz: I have found that it is crucial to be consistent about when I post assignments, and to provide students with grace and understanding if they do not submit something on time, because everyone is struggling right now.

Christine Hitchcock: I think it's helpful to give students some



choice in how they demonstrate their learning as well as in the materials they use (text, audio, video, etc.).

What are the biggest challenges that you have encountered in teaching remotely?

Kim Heckart: I miss the human face-to-face contact with students. Sometimes they need a hug or reassurance that can only be given in person. I miss that the most. We have so many learning celebrations and projects at the end of the year that we won't be able to do in the same way. For example, the kids all interviewed a person (usually a grandparent) about their hopes, wishes, dreams, and goals. We invite the interviewed people to school to hear the students' pieces. It is a magical day where the adults who are interviewed realize their impact on the student. This year, we are mailing the writings, but the human connection of hearing it in person won't happen.

Jennifer Reiter: Time. It is taking me much longer to prepare lessons than it did in a "regular" classroom situation. I'm not sure that I've worked this hard since I was a first-year teacher. Everything is new and different, and of course any time you involve tech, there are bound to be problems that you never thought of. It's also really hard to be a great teacher and a great mom at the same time all day long. I sometimes wonder if my own son is getting the short end of the deal, while I'm focused on my classroom for most of the day.

Zackary Seitz: I miss seeing my students in person. There are other challenges, but that has been the most challenging thing for me. I miss teaching in person, and the ebb and flow of the classroom. I miss having access to different resources and being able to design dynamic lessons that students complete together in person.

Christine Hitchcock: The onus is much more on the students to reach out to teachers with questions. Teachers can't read students' nonverbal cues to see how they are responding to instruction (unless students are participating in some sort of live instruction via videoconference, though not all students can do that because of lack of devices, Internet, etc.). It can be difficult to contact students who do not want to be contacted.

Do you find that teaching online has any advantages over regular classroom teaching?

Kim Heckart: I cannot say there are any advantages at this point. I was already doing choice boards and personalized learning prior to the pandemic. This may have made the transition to online easier. But I have found that without an adult with the student (at this age), there aren't many students that will just do it on their own. They don't see the urgency of meeting the standards as teachers do.

I believe the advantage will be later when I can use some of the materials that I am creating in the classroom for a substitute teacher (it would be me teaching a lesson that a sub guides the students through). I also have learned how to provide so many more applications/activities in Seesaw (<https://web.seesaw.me/>). I will be using this more whether we are online or in the classroom.

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Jennifer Reiter: I have found that the quieter students are finding their voice. In a regular classroom discussion, those quiet kids are frequently overshadowed by the bigger personalities. In distance learning, with recorded responses, they are able to stop, think, and plan what they want to say first. It seems to be making them more willing to open up and share. The converse is also true. Some of the students who would dominate discussions by rambling are finding that the time limits of most of the recording assignments force them to be more succinct in their thoughts.

I'm also impressed with the creativity that is coming out of some of my kids. They seem to be more willing to take a chance with their work and are making

assignments their own. They are creating songs, plays, and demonstrations, instead of just responding in writing.

From a teacher point of view, in some ways, I feel closer to my students. I'm doing one-on-one calls with each one once a week. For a solid fifteen minutes each student has my undivided attention. How often does that happen in a regular classroom? Sometimes we are reviewing academic questions, but more often than not, we're just talking.

Jennifer Ingold: Well, it certainly has its advantages for the introverts of our classrooms. They are extremely happy right now. I think with a combination of the right activities and platform that you can do more with certain students, due to the fact that you have flexibility and minimal time constraints. However, school is by nature a social experience. We learn so much about who we are and what we are capable of by the relationships that we are allowed to cultivate.

Zackary Seitz: I think that access for individuals with difficulties

attending class in person is going to be one of the best outcomes for this sudden shift towards teaching online. In the future, I will have ways for students to learn the basic concepts online if they have to miss class for athletics, or are sick.

Christine Hitchcock: I feel that I can sometimes give more personalized feedback, especially through text and video feedback (screencasts, for example). It can be challenging to have one-on-one time. While a screencast isn't technically a synchronous one-on-one discussion, this strategy does allow the instructor to give very personalized feedback in as much depth as may be helpful to the student.

What do you miss most about not being in a regular classroom?

Jennifer Reiter: I miss the feeling of having us all together in our special space learning together. I think that our true sense of community comes from our shared academic experiences. That's the part that is missing in this online environment. I'm also missing some of those "end of the year" traditions that we all take for granted.

Jennifer Ingold: I have always been a fan of technology as a classroom tool, but also a firm believer that it should never replace the teacher. I think this pandemic has really thrust that message into the limelight. There is no technological substitute for active teacher presence and the subsequent personal relationships. I think one of the main reasons teachers will be successful with distance learning is because of the close, personal relationships that were forged with students prior to school closures.

Christine Hitchcock: I do miss seeing those "aha!" light bulb moments with students and having students work together. The amazing "vibe" of learning happening in a classroom is so wonderful.

What are your plans for assessing student learning?

Kim Heckart: I am an elementary teacher, and online classes for grades K-8 in my district are voluntary. This means that I cannot assess students based on online classes. I can teach the standards and allow all students to have access, but I cannot assess them.

Our 9–12 students are being assessed. Our district chose this path because all of our 9–12 students have been 1:1 [i.e., one school-provided device for every student] and classes have had an online format/capacity for quite some time.

Jennifer Reiter: We are providing feedback, both through writing and video messages. We will not be giving grades

for the last semester; we'll just be writing narrative report cards. We don't feel comfortable giving grades because of the differences in the kids' learning environments and differing levels of support being offered.

Jennifer Ingold: The bigger question is: what should kids be responsible for "learning" during a time of national emergency? And, how do we keep those learning goals fair and equitable?

I believe that students need to acquire information, but more importantly they need opportunities to be able to apply this information in the real world. I designed a dual approach to my social studies pedagogy for the rest of the year centering on that idea: students acquiring knowledge of history and then applying that knowledge. First, students must complete content-driven tasks through traditional online resources like audio, video and Google Docs, but only as a measure of acquiring background information (like doing research). Subsequently, they complete a series of skills-related activities applying that historical background knowledge to our current reality. It essentially becomes primary source "living-through-history" storytelling, but with an empathic twist.

Assessment needs to be progressive, continuous, and more of a measure of personal student growth to be truly effective. I will be looking for individual growth patterns, based on these criteria and work submitted.

Christine Hitchcock: I think it helps to have some flexibility and student choice in how to demonstrate learning. I also think that remote learning may make it easier for teachers to have students reflect on what they've learned, how they've learned it, and how they can apply what they've learned. Sometimes, in the hustle and bustle of a classroom, the need for reflection can get overlooked or cut off.

Any additional thoughts?

April Francis: Though I have lost family and friends, and I have high anxiety during this time, I find being an educator rewarding. Being an educator allows me to see the bright side of this unprecedented time. It reminds me that I am supporting our future generation to be more compassionate and resilient at a time when we are most vulnerable. As a historian, I hope that when we reflect back on this time period, we remember how as a society, as humans, we helped each other get through this and are stronger for it. 🌍

Social Education welcomes contributions about your experiences of teaching remotely during the pandemic.

Contributions can deal with any aspect of remote teaching and learning, including personal experiences, strategies that worked and strategies that did not, and the overall impact of remote instruction on students. We would especially like to hear from readers who teach in low-income areas.

For general submission guidelines, please go to <https://www.socialstudies.org/publications/howtosubmit>