

Sustaining Student-Centered Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

With Arria Coburn and Ellen Foley

The following is a transcript, edited for clarity, from the video "Student-Centered Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic."

What student-centered learning strategies have you prioritized during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Arria Coburn: The techniques that we're using. I would say the three that jump to mind is student voice, student belongingness, and also personalized learning. And thinking about remote learning and how we started, I think that we were just trying to figure out how to get the kids logged onto the computer. And that felt more like compliance, right? So teachers were coming up with lessons. Our students were logging on, but we were missing those three components. And then as time went on and we realized that this wasn't going to be just something for a moment, a couple of weeks, this was something that we would be in for the long haul, we had to leverage practices that we know really maximize student learning. And so those are the three that jump to mind.

So we've always tried to leverage student voice. It's been really important to us and personalized learning. I think that the new piece was student belongingness. And I think that we learned a lot from our family surveys in that when we began to look at student engagement and we saw that our engagement and our attendance numbers were very low. In speaking to our families and our students, we learned that students were like, "I just don't feel seen. I'm logging on to the computer, we didn't have cameras on." And it proved to be a challenge. And so, as we began to reimagine what remote learning needed to look like in order for our students to succeed, student belongingness rose to a new level.

And I also think about how we were thinking about student voice. I think in the past, it was very easy to pull together a student group into my office, or have them come to the auditorium or pop into a class and leverage their voice. With remote learning student voice looked a lot different. It was hard to gather students to come together on a link. And so we had to be creative.

Ellen Foley: Collaboration. And I know we have all these rules on social distancing, but kids are so isolated right now at home. I see it with my own children. They are not able to go to their usual sports or other activities, or even just play outside with their friends as much as they used to, especially when the pandemic was at its height. So I've really tried to build in collaboration into my classes because kids are social. Learning is social. The brain is social. We need to stay connected. So that's the big focus is trying to figure out how to do that safely, but to make students have those connections.

What has worked best to keep students engaged and motivated this year?

Arria Coburn: I definitely believe that it's being intentional and transparent. I think that because there's so many moving parts that happened so fast, it's important for us to make sure that we're communicating with our families as quick as possible. And so our schedule was built intentionally with the idea that [CREW 00:03:03], that's our student advisory that meets in the morning, and this midday break was really important. And so every single day, our students gather with their [CREW 00:03:13] teacher in a small group of about 12 to 14 students. And it starts off their day. And in the middle of the day from 11 to 12 is a break. And that break is really important because it allows for teachers to have their personal time. But it also allows for me to be able to gather a group of students together. It also allowed time for us to have clubs and activities, because we know that with remote learning, it's very difficult to have those after-school clubs. And so that 11 to 12 break in the middle of the day allowed for teachers to run the extracurricular activities. And also for us to continue with our small group student voice groups.

Ellen Foley: I think feedback has been really important. In some ways it's a little bit easier. Our classes are smaller. We have about half of our students attending. I am teaching every day in person, but I have about a third of my students who come every day and two thirds who come every other day. So, giving them personal feedback and being able to do that because of the smaller classes is very useful. And it just shows students that you know them, that you care about them, that you're connected to them. And again, it makes that connection. It emphasizes that connection and that's important.

Having consistent and quick feedback to students. So that's like formal feedback, like what you write on their assignment, but honestly, a lot of kids don't read what you write on their assignment. So also just talking to them about what they're learning, really emphasizing their strengths, what you see that they're doing well. And it helps build that human connection and relationship. And it also, I think, motivates students to continue working. So I think that's been a really important piece, especially for the two thirds of students that I don't see every day being able to say, "Oh, I saw what you did on that assignment. I really was impressed by how you connected that evidence and made that opinion." That, I think, motivates them to continue working even when they're not in front of you.

What have been some bright spots this year?

Arria Coburn: So this pandemic has allowed me the opportunity to teach a class. And I think that that has been the best experience. I honestly think that it's something that all leaders should do. I think when you move too far away from being in the thick of it, you, you forget important pieces that are needed. And so, one success is I have a CREW. I have a group of 12th graders who are authentically honest, and I love that about them. I start every day with my CREW and it's been a great experience. And if not for the pandemic, I wouldn't have had that opportunity to have a class. So that's definitely been a bright spot.

I think another bright spot for me, last week I was at a conference and the facilitator was pushing us to think about what advantages we have because of the closure. And I think the go-to line is to say because of the pandemic learning isn't happening, learning has stopped. And we were then guided to go into classes. And I just popped into three random classes, and it was emotional because what I saw was learning happening at its best. I saw an 11th grade AP class, and one of the juniors was sharing a written

piece, a written narrative about the pandemic. And it was emotional, but it was authentic. It was her voice. And the teacher was doing a great job at asking and pushing her to think, to expand her writing. And then I popped into a seventh-grade class and they were talking about race and equity and what it meant to them. And I can remember, I asked a question. I said, what are you guys working? And the seventh grader who is a quiet boy, he explains the story to me. And he's citing evidence. And for me, that's learning at its best. And that was just me popping into some random classes.

And so that has been a bright spot for sure. And so being proud when you get to see learning happening. Because I think it's very easy to go into that narrative and look at sort of the deficits, almost deficit thinking that learning isn't happening, the gaps are widening, but I think that when you have a school that's committed and it's putting all the right pieces in place in leveraging student voice and thinking about student belongingness and also utilizing teacher voice and parent voices, all of those stakeholders, I think that learning can still happen in a very personalized way.

Ellen Foley: We were just at a staff meeting and we were playing the song I'm Still Standing by Elton John. You might know it. It has been a really tough year, but we are still standing. And actually I think our school is actually improving. We just had a bright spot for our school. That's been that we just had a walk through by the district and we got just incredible rave reviews for our attendance, for our culture, for our questioning and use of evidence, asking students to use evidence in the classroom. So it was really a positive thing. It happened right before break and was a great way to start the February break.

And I also have been able to, because I teach statistics and build in a lot of stats and there's been so many stats in the news these days from COVID data, which kids are actually honestly a little tired of hearing about it at this point. And also the election, there was so much election data. I had a really great project where students analyzed polls from all of the swing states. And then they each had a swing state that they had to analyze the polls from and make a prediction about who would win. We know the polls weren't necessarily great, but they did learn a lot about polling and about using descriptive statistics. And were so excited to be able to predict whether they predicted their state right. For example, one student had Ohio. And she was very excited that ... She wasn't excited about who won Ohio, but she was very excited that she predicted it right.

How has your school community, including teachers, risen to present challenges?

Arria Coburn: We've tried to meet with our families once a month, especially in the beginning. And we did a lot of family surveys and actually a group of teachers helped us craft a list of questions to ask our families. And so using that, we were able to come up with some tools for our school to make sure that we were meeting the needs of our students and our families.

The once a month family meeting that we have, it's small in attendance, but nonetheless, it definitely allows for us to share information with our families and to get information. And so I think being transparent and also just, as a leader, being humble. To say, "What's not working and what's working?" And then using that feedback immediately to make some changes. And so I think that when families say, "Listen this is what's not working. The amount of assignments during asynchronous time. My child really

needs some additional help," using that to then make some changes and then reporting back to the families to say it's not just a survey that we took, just to sort of check it off the box, but we really wanted to hear what you had to say and then use it and apply it for how to move us forward.

Ellen Foley: We're really lucky as a staff that we've really connected. We've always been really connected to each other. We have, even though we don't have a ton of time together, we have built relationships over the years. We have a very pretty stable staff. And I think that speaks to our leadership that people stay. And I think there's a lot of humanness where people have young kids and just understanding that this is a really hard thing that we're and acknowledging that and supporting people. We had all those stories where you've probably heard where a staff member was exposed so we had several staff out at a time. Everyone's covering no one's getting prep times or breaks for the day, but we just really still stuck with it. And it's going much better now. And less of that disruption is happening.