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## LEARNING IN LOCKDOWNS

Creating Safe, Structured, and Student-Centered Classes During the Pandemic

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### Values and the Concept of Learning

As a teacher trainer, I always talk to my student teachers about the importance of establishing their own teaching philosophy. What do they think good teaching is? How can that be achieved, and how do they know they have achieved it? When I reflect on my own teaching or plan an academic year, all the activities, tasks, assignments, and pedagogical choices rest on my beliefs and values of what good teaching is and how it can be achieved. In fact, each module and every single lesson boils down to those deeply held beliefs and values.

My personal standards of quality education are based on the values, beliefs, and conceptions of learning described in the National Curriculum of Education in Finland. The National Curriculum is, most importantly, a set of values in education, together with guidelines and goals that should be reached. However, it does not specify what you should exactly “do” to reach those goals. Thus, teachers in Finland are required to do a fair amount of organizing, planning, and structuring themselves on how to reach the goals and follow the guidelines set by the National Board of Education. In other words, it is the teacher’s responsibility to plan and organize and also to assess and evaluate students’ learning as we do not have standardized testing in Finland. Teachers in Finland have extensive freedom in what to do in class, but it also comes with plenty of responsibility. As a teacher trainer, I always say to my student teachers that being a teacher means that you will need to make many pedagogical decisions to reach the stated goals set in the curriculum. However, how you accomplish them can be done in many different ways. The approach undertaken should reflect your values, beliefs, and the concept of learning that you believe in.

Such bounded freedom within mandated curriculum goals came to be as important as ever in March 2020 when we were given a three-day notice from government officials that they would be closing schools and all teaching would be conducted online for the foreseeable future. This was a historical situation in a country that values education above all else. The only time in history that Finland has ever closed its schools was during the Second World War. We do not close schools because of snow days or bad weather, so the country-wide school closures were quite remarkable. The announcement gave us three days to plan and organize all our classes online. During the early days of the pandemic, I really thought about my values and what good teaching means online. I also reflected on how to maintain students’ well-being; in effect, I wanted to make sure that, in addition to learning, my students were also feeling safe.

### Student-Centered Learning in Online Classes

One of the essential values of my teaching is that learning should be active. A second essential is that students should use English as much as possible. In addition, I believe that communication, cooperation, and collaboration play an integral part in my lessons. In language learning, it is vital that the students are able to practice their spoken language skills in every lesson. In other words, in my classes, we spend a fair amount of time doing paired or group activities that promote my students' communication skills. We play board games, debate, discuss different topics, engage in role plays, and practice communication in different types of situations. We also practice new vocabulary and grammar with different types of spoken activities.

Clearly, active learning and collaboration were vital in my online classes. To achieve high levels of collaboration, I created different channels for our online platform where students would be able to complete oral activities with their partners or in groups via video conference. My online classes were structured so that we started with activities and games that were completed together as a whole class. Then they would move onto the channels to complete tasks in pairs or in groups. Finally, a small part of that class time would be allocated for independent work. Such a structure became to be a common thread in all my online classes.

One of the key concepts when promoting active or student-centered learning is the ratio of student versus teacher time in class. In my face-to-face classes at school, I always make sure that I have designated most of the class time for active and engaging learning while attempting to minimize teacher talk. This emphasis on student-centered instruction becomes even more important in online teaching, where student voice and engagement are extremely critical. In online learning, opportunities for students to work together and collaborate become even more important than in a regular class. Successful collaboration at a distance offers the student a chance to socially interact outside of their family structures. As a teacher, you want to make sure that even those students who might not have many friends and social connections can still feel a sense of belonging and have a chance to interact with other people in your class.

### Lesson Structure and Planning

Another aspect of teaching that is crucial when planning are the routines and the structure of the lesson. For instance, I usually start my lessons with a fun game of revision about what we have learned previously. This technique is easily transferred to my online classes as the online lessons also start with a fun game of revision. Moreover, I also want to plan my online lessons so that they will be as similar as possible to my in-class lessons at school.

At the same time, I thought that this approach would create a sense of security as students realized that even though they are at home and even though the world

around them might be in chaos and quite scary at times, our lessons and things that we do in class would remain more or less the same. That sense of security and feeling of being safe when you are learning is crucial. Suffice to say, if students are not feeling safe, they cannot concentrate on learning. Moreover, in classes during the lockdown, we never discussed the pandemic. I avoided directly discussing the pandemic as I wanted to give them a reprieve from such negative circumstances. I want my students to enjoy and have fun in class.

### Lessons Learned

It is time to look back now to the time when the announcement to close the schools was made by the government. In reflecting on and evaluating my pedagogical decisions and my approach to teaching online, I realize that I managed to succeed because I was able to follow my teaching philosophy and values. Later in the spring of 2020, when the schools were opened for the last two weeks of the academic year, I collected some feedback from my students about their experiences from the lockdown. I felt fortunate that many of them praised my online classes for being easy to adjust to and that learning English was easy and fun. Comments from these students included kind words that “English classes were well-planned and organized,” and that “English classes were one of the best online classes.”

Now that we are in lockdown again, I tell my student teachers how critical it is to think deeply about what is essential in teaching as they are planning their first remote lessons. For instance, they must take into consideration students’ sense of security during this global crisis. The most important question to think about when planning to teach, whether it is online or in-person, held with preschoolers or adults, or is self-paced or teacher dominated, is what good teaching means. The answer should be at the core of every lesson, module, and course you are planning. Your values and emphasis as a teacher might change over the years as you gain more experience and learn to assess and develop your teaching strategies and approaches. Nevertheless, the core philosophical questions on which you base your plans and activities remain the essentially same.

### Reflection Questions

1. What are the values that you base your teaching on? Have there been any recent changes?
2. What is your conception of learning? In what way has it changed during the past few years?
3. What kinds of strategies would you emphasize in online classes and why?
4. What makes effective online teaching, in your opinion, and how is it different from face-to-face instruction?