

The New Normal Of Learning: *Build Back Better*

Written by Professor John Hattie

We have so much to learn from the recent “pandemic teaching and learning” experience. The strongest message is to learn from what went well during COVID, and ensure we do NOT return to the old ‘grammar of schooling’. We should be collating and sharing all the excellent examples of learning away from school, and asking how we could introduce them into the regular school day – and give up some of the old ‘grammar of schooling’ and move to the ‘new grammar’.

ESTEEMING TEACHER EXPERTISE

We truly now should esteem the expertise of teachers – unlike parents with 1-3 children in the home class, teachers have 20-30 at once, can motivate them (mostly) to engage in activities that the students at the start do not know to do (you don’t go to school to learn that you know), know how to make the struggle of learning joyful, can provide feedback at the right time and in the right way to each student (and not permit children to continually ask “is this right”) and teachers do not ‘do’ the work for the students – and for 200+ days at least 5 hours every day. Teachers know where to go next for each student’s learning, how to balance the breadth and depth of the ever varied school curriculum, and invest in after school work of marking, preparing, developing resources, going to professional learning and meetings. As parents, how exhausted were you each day!

Many schools ran dual systems of students in front of them at school, and working one-on-one and with groups at home, undertaking professional learning on how to use the government required learning management systems, and are now preparing for the recovery – while their health was at more risk than for most of us, nary without a grumble, and with an elan and positive disposition. We should truly esteem this expertise, and make ‘teachers’ this year’s Australians of the Year. Yes, health care workers will be competitors, but more Australians have been affected directly by teachers. Maybe both Teachers and Health care workers as joint winners.

LEARNING HOW TO LEARN

The experience for many was less ‘distance learning’ and more ‘home schooling’. It was not students receiving lessons over the web and doing them, as it entailed parents being involved in the teaching. Perhaps it is no wonder than the average performance of students who enter home schooling is about 75 percentile – parents are often only willing to home school the brighter students.

So what do these brighter student have which makes it easier – they know how to self-regulate – that is, they know when to apply various strategies, they know when to hold out distractions, they know about their thinking skills, and they know how to self-evaluate. Teachers love these students too – and tertiary institutions depend on their students having these skills – otherwise they are lost in the large classes ($N > 100+$), they cannot do their assignments, and do not know how to interpret what is needed or how to interpret the feedback, cues and real messaging from the lecturers.

Surely we need to deliberately teach students these skills. They would be most evident to parents during the home schooling (where your children over reliant on structure, demanded crystal clear directions, and sought lots of feedback that they were right, or could they work through messy structures, work out what the directions really meant, and strived for feedback more about where to next). Students in schools that already teach these skills would have less hassles and indeed thrive during the COVID and recovery – many of our Visible Learning schools have contacted me to say, that this work on teaching self-regulation is now really paying off right now.

A NEW GRAMMAR OF SCHOOLING

Our current 'grammar of schools' is teacher talk a lot (80%+ on average), ask all the questions (200+ a day), and dominant the flow of lessons. Yes, this works. There is also a conspiracy in that above average students want more teacher talk, teacher questions, and teacher control – they know how to play this game. But there are many who want to be taught the skills of self-regulation so they can join the others in understanding really what is wanted, understand what the intention and success criteria are, and know what to do when they do not know what to do. This COVID crisis will help identify the students who need these skills – so identify them and teach them these skills.

Some students learnt and felt so much safer at home. I have had long correspondences with some parents with children fearful of school, with autism, with high levels of self-regulation (some gifted, many not), with experiences of bullying and they thrived alone at home. How powerful to think how some parents could be involved in the new grammar, maybe not just at home, but within schools.

In secondary school, many are now better prepared for tertiary studies - in most tertiary courses (University, Vocational Institutes, and is much of adult learning courses) the classes are large, lectures video-d, much distance learning, and high dependence on students being self-regulated. This is their 'normal'. The best preparation for this is not small classes, lots of teacher talk, attending to compliance with the teachers' ways, doing tasks to the class timetable, waiting for the next instruction and task. The evidence points to the power of success for students who know how to learn in classes of 200, alone or with friends more than with teachers, and with higher levels of self-regulation.

Without wanting to get into the class size debate, I have a colleague of a large high school who runs regular classes of 100+ in the last two years of high school to teach and prepare them for this experience, and the follow through for these students is higher levels of tertiary success (and the high school is in the poorest area of a large city). The point is not distance learning, not class size, but teaching students to take more regulation of their own learning. Universities have sped up their reliance on video-ing classes, using distance learning and a more total online experience, so what have we in K-12 learnt from our COVID experiences to better teach them how to thrive in this environment.

How are teacher education courses preparing future teachers to adapt to the new normal, particularly given they have the chance to model excellent distance learning – as 27% of Australian teacher candidates complete their course online! We have the ideal opportunity to develop best practice, but then these graduates go into the old grammar of schooling. And nothing happens in many schools without good leadership (or good things can be stopped through bad leadership), so here is a chance for enterprising leaders to seize the moment and promote the new normal.

Do we really need to have all the students sitting in front of a teacher every day? Yes, there are duties of care, there is safety, but the point is to teach the students perhaps to engage in distance learning, in more open ended assignments outside the direct supervision of the teacher. In schools our Visible Learning team work with this is common place, we have "learning pits" (invented by John Edwards – a good Oz/Kiwi, and popularized by James Nottingham) and sometimes they are physically real, sometimes just places to work outside the class to learn how to struggle, places to enjoy not knowing and discovering links – and our work has shown that there is a right time to go into the pit.

In Singapore, I understand since SARS 2003, it is compulsory for two days a year for all students to work from home, with their parents present – to teach them how to learn in this environment, and to teach the teachers how to best teach in this environment. Maybe we should have this – like teacher professional learning days, we have joint student, parent, and teacher professional learning days.

DIAGNOSE AND SUPPORT

The most critical task in the recovery is for excellent diagnoses. Which students thrived, which did not? Yes, the media and many academic blogs are full of angst that the “usual” disadvantaged groups need to be catered for - and yes they do but do not confuse categories of students (like, from low socioeconomic families, Aboriginal, autistic etc.) with students. Some of these student would have done very well at home, some not. For example, I can imagine 10 groups as possibly the new disadvantage from COVID, and the plea in the first few weeks back is to have open eyes, diagnoses and look for these students ([click here](#) for more on this topic).

1. Students who struggle with low self-regulation to maintain learning progression, that and who are been highly dependent on the teacher.
2. Those who return with high levels of stress and social and emotional concerns with possible behavioral issues arising. [Students, like us, are social animals. Maurice Galton showed that the greatest predictor of success when students move schools (and here I make the link for leaving the place called school to home and now back to school) is whether they make a friend in the first month – be attentive to re-building friendship, teachers and parents may get more mileage from this, than more teaching and learning. School is not much without friends.]
3. Students with no or low access proficiency in using quality learning strategies and guidance necessary to promote development.
4. Student who have access to fewer educational resources and activities relative to peers in particular in relation to limited digital engagement – this includes the percentage who did not log on at all during the home schooling! ([read EdWeek blog here](#)).
5. Students who already had a lack of progress in school.
6. Students who have low concepts of themselves as a learner at school, and likely the same at home, and even more so on return.
7. Students who lacks proficiency in critical reading and numeracy skills to move to the next level - particularly in the Years 1-3, and thus more likely to become part of the ‘Matthew effect’.
8. Students living in homes which are not safe havens (for many of these students, school is the safe haven), there will be an exacerbation of physical and emotional health issues.
9. Students with parents who have low capacity or desire to engage them in the schoolwork at home and who ignore or permit no engagement with schoolwork. We have so much to learn how to work with parents to inform them about what learning looks like in today’s classrooms, and how they can help to listen to and develop their children’s language of learning, how to welcome errors and joyful struggle in learning, and to esteem the expertise of teachers.
10. Students in upper high school preparing for high stakes exams. will lose the opportunity to engage.

At the start of this COVID crisis, I wrote a [blog in Corwin Connect](#) noting that the effects on most students will be minimal, and for many it will be positive. We should not underestimate the desire and expertise of teachers to boost, accelerate, and cope with enhanced teaching and learning, and for sure this will happen upon recovery. We should acknowledge that within days they stopped the old grammar, invested in the distance/home schooling model, and will work hard in the recovery and boosting.

We must collate the positive learnings from COVID, through channels such as the **AITSL Australian Teacher Response Facebook page**, where teachers can reconnect, and I would hope add many ideas about the learnings, what we can take to the ‘new normal’ and I encourage teachers to join. I know of one WA high school where teachers are writing short essays on their learning and they are most impressive (Go Clarkson). If you have nowhere to send them, send them to me. Yes, we can discuss the negatives (and there will be) but we should embrace the positives.

If I know anything from the research on previous outages (hurricanes, earthquakes, strikes, wars) it is that we forget the good things and hustle face back to the comfort of the old. We have a chance to truly make a difference to the quality, the teaching, the learning, the outcomes of schooling by using this unexpected 'experiment' to bring a 'new normal' of teaching and learning.

I would like to know your thoughts and if you'd like to leave a comment, please email me at info.australia@corwin.com.

BUILD BACK BETTER!

Professor John Hattie is an award-winning education researcher and best-selling author with nearly 30 years of experience examining what works best in student learning and achievement. His research, better known as Visible Learning, is a culmination of nearly 30 years synthesizing more than 1,600 meta-analyses comprising more than 95,000 studies involving over 300 million students around the world. He has presented and keynoted in over 350 international conferences and has received numerous recognitions for his contributions to education. His notable publications include **Visible Learning, Visible Learning for Teachers, Visible Learning and the Science of How We Learn, Visible Learning for Mathematics, Grades K-12**, and, most recently, **10 Mindframes for Visible Learning**.