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Annie P. Spear

C.O.O.R. ISD/Central Michigan University, anniespear@gmail.com

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Creating an Online Community of Learners During the COVID-19 Shutdown Using Michigan's *Literacy Essentials*

by Annie P. Spear

If all humans, regardless of age, have fundamental needs of relatedness, autonomy, and competence (Deci & Ryan, 2000), what happens when everything our society is built upon is suddenly turned up-side-down? How do we meet fundamental needs for ourselves, our families, our students, and our colleagues? COVID-19 was an unexpected, unprecedented challenge for everyone, but presented a particular upheaval for educators, children, and families.

My first thought after hearing schools would be closed went to relatedness. *How will we keep children collaborating, conversing, and socially connected?* My next thought was, *Michigan is in a literacy crisis! How can I support the field and families in this time? How can I teach my own children and yet support those in my districts?* In response, I set up a Google site, a Facebook page, and created a series of free online classes. Each offering had a description with an outline for the “class” including goals, age ranges targeted, and a schedule. Registration was linked to class offerings using Google Forms. Once logistics were complete, I sifted through my instructional materials, my children and I rearranged a space to create a classroom, and we were off.

A Structure for Success Involved Purposeful Considerations and Planning Sanity for Parents and Easy Access to Materials

Talking to many parents, it soon became clear that there was a lot of panic surrounding the end of in-person learning for the year and the lack of “school” materials around the home. I knew to be successful, I would have to address that concern. To join my groups, children simply needed a device that could connect via Zoom. Other than that, they needed only scrap



Annie P. Spear



paper, something to write with, or an object with print (any book, junk mail, magazine, etc.) to participate. I designed my classes connected to our state-wide *Literacy Essentials* initiative to be high-quality, accessible, and easy. Using practices from *PreK and K to 3 Literacy Essential 10* (2016), I strived for open, ongoing communication and information sharing that would help family members know how to support children at home. I also offered two free *Coffee with the Coach* Zoom meetings on topics that I felt might be useful to families: *Reimagined Read Alouds* and *What makes a “sight word” a “sight word?”* In each of these sessions I outlined actionable ways for families to support children through easy, authentic, everyday interactions.

Student Choice

From my experience, I’ve learned that students more eagerly engage in activities when they have choice. As a literacy coach, I am committed to providing choice in learning and creating environments that are purpose-

ful, authentic, and grounded in collaboration. In my online instruction, I maintained that commitment and noticed that the students I worked with fully engaged at all different entry points. Within my classes, I built in choice whenever I could, even if it was limited (i.e., draw a picture versus write a word or use the “chat” feature versus “raise your hand” to speak). Student appreciated the choice and, in turn, designed projects that reflected their individuality yet simultaneously engaged in important literacy activities.

Grounded in Research

Connecting Classes to Michigan's *Literacy Essentials*

With the cancellation of school, I knew I wanted to maintain some of the rigor and instructional activities that students would have received in school. Since I would be working with students from all districts, I designed offerings based on MAISA-GELN's (2016) *Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy Pre-kindergarten* (hereafter *PreK Literacy Essentials*) and MAISA-GELN's (2016) *Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy Grades K to 3* (hereafter *K-3 Literacy Essentials*). I chose areas I've witnessed as an ISD Early Literacy Coach to be challenging, yet critical, instructional practices. Understanding theory and pedagogy is necessary, but being able to combine that knowledge into daily instructional practice is the greater challenge. I hoped I would teach children and model for teachers who might implement these practices as they planned their own online instruction. Classes (see Figures 1 and 2) were designed to meet a variety of ages and areas of literacy development aligned to Michigan's ELA Standards.

Figure 1. Prekindergarten to Grade 2 Offerings

Figure 2. Grades 2-5 Offerings

Inside a Few of the Offerings

ABC Superhero

Beginning with the youngest learners in mind, I developed an offering focused on building and reinforcing letter-sound knowledge. I called the course ABC Superhero. It was based on the Enhanced Alphabet Knowledge (EAK) protocol by Jones, Reutzel, and Clark (2012). This instructional strategy supports alphabet knowledge through letter recognition, letter naming, sound/symbol association, letter discrimination, categorization and authentic application (See *PreK* and *K to 3 Literacy Essentials 4, 5, and 6*) introduced children to a different letter each time we met. They were taught the letter, the letter sound(s) (and how to produce it), and how to form the letter. They also searched for the letter in context something with print (magazine, cereal box, mail flyer) and a pencil, crayon, or marker. This class was designed for any child needing additional instruction in letter names and sounds. See Figure 3 for the class outline.

Figure 3. ABC Superhero Agenda

Word Study

Word study is a highly supported research practice with a specific pedagogical approach intended to teach children spelling, phonological awareness, phonics, and vocabulary. Word study has connections to both *PreK* and *K to 3 Literacy Essentials 4, 5, and 6*. Leveraging my teaching experience and prior research with word study, I chose to use *Words Their Way* (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2016; Johnston, Invernizzi, Helman, Bear, and Templeton, 2015) different I had materials that I had successfully used with children in the classroom, but needed to discover how to implement sound sorting, picture sorting, and word sorting in an effective, engaging way in an online format. My goal was to make the session engaging and requiring minimal materials. In the end, students needed only a piece of paper and pencil/pen/marker to participate. I carefully selected short texts (e.g., poems, songs) for students to apply learning through word hunting. I later shifted from offering word study alone to blending it with another practice that was easier to implement online in a class called Mystery Word.

Mystery Word
(aka Making Words or Building Words)

Literacy learning is enhanced when teachers provide opportunities to simultaneously engage in phonological awareness and phonics activities (e.g., Cunningham & Hall, 1994). *Making Words* (Cunningham & Cunningham, 1992; Cunningham & Hall, 1994) supports phonological awareness and phonics together. It requires students to manipulate sounds, attach letter symbols to sounds, and apply patterns of spelling. By starting with smaller words and building from there, children are scaffolded in this lesson format. The ways in which students engage in a Making Words lesson supports *PreK* and *K to 3 Literacy Essentials 4, 5, and 6*. Children that participated were in Grades K to 4. While I ensured a variety of words to support all levels, the scaffolded lesson structure helped meet this span of ages and needs.

At the beginning of each session, I introduced the letters needed and asked children to write them on scrap paper. I had a pocket chart on display with the letters

necessary for building words. I built words on the big chart (with their help), and they built them individually in their setting. After building words on day one, we sorted words by pattern on day 2. We also played games such as *Guess My Rule* with the words, sorting them into patterns and having others guess the categories (e.g., words with long a, short a, and oddball). Children were also invited to create a “rule” for the class to guess. I chose mystery words purposefully for age-appropriate spelling patterns and connected them to something happening in the world (See Figure 4). Feedback from the children demonstrated they enjoyed class and particularly liked the challenge to figure out the “mystery word” each week.

The Mystery Word is conservation

| 2 letters | 3 letters | 4 letters | 5 letters | 6 letters | 7 letters |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|-----------|
| is | usa | visa | visa | corona | ovation |
| at | not | tona | tona | ration | |
| on | nut | snat | snat | nation | |
| us | use | rate | vine | gaster | |
| to | too | runa | | | |
| | ton | lost | | | |
| | tan | corn | | | |
| | can | cone | | | |
| | cot | nest | | | |
| | our | vest | | | |
| | eat | soar | | | |
| | rat | vin | eat | last | |
| | not | vin | eat | into | |

Figure 4. Student Recording Sheet

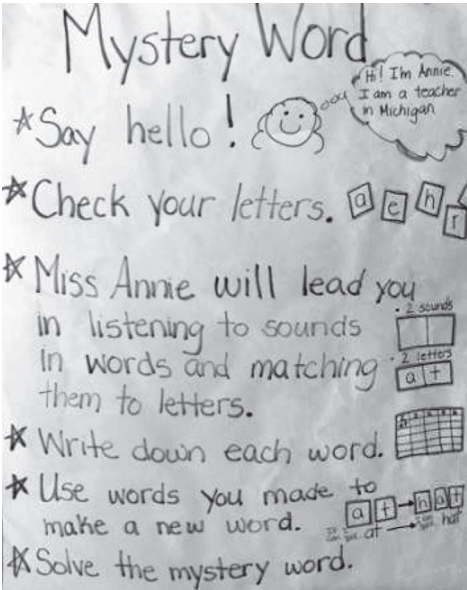


Figure 5. Class “agenda”

Finally, I knew I wanted to offer an opportunity for elementary students to engage in meaningful and authentic reading and writing experiences grounded in choice so I developed a Project-Based Research Club. This class consisted of students in Grades 2-6. I set the stage outlining the class goals and letting children know what to expect (See Figure 6). I needed a relevant topic of interest to teach the children about the process of researching so they would carry over the research process when engaging in their own research project in a topic of their choice.

Project Based Research Club (Grades 2-5)

Mondays and Wednesdays 1:00pm

Researching and writing about what we learn is an important part of day-to-day living.

If you would like to join this group, you will:

- have a short mini-lesson with Annie
- choose a topic you would like to study
- have an opportunity to work with other kids on the same topic
- read informational text about your topic
- write about your topic in different ways you choose
- present what you learned to our group

Figure 6. Online Description and Registration Sample

Figure 7. Google Form Example Google Form Registration Sample

Together, in our conversations, we discovered students were fond of animals and concerned about how COVID-19 may affect them, so we chose *How*

is COVID-19 affecting animals? We defined ourselves as the collective audience with hopes that we would share this with a greater group. The students knew my purpose was to teach them researching skills in our process to answer our research question. We generated questions, I provided articles for research, and we completed a simple Fact/Question/Response organizer. This led to further research and the need to back up our “facts” with evidence from credible sources. Students used the facts we gathered to generate some sentences as we began to draft our text. Then my own two children took the draft our group started and continued to co-author a draft. This draft was presented to the group for feedback. We revised and edited it as a group, creating a final draft. I supported this work with resources that I shared in class and with families.

The next phase was to use our new learning to persuade people to take action. The children decided they wanted to persuade people to help stop the spread of COVID-19. Each child was asked to choose a way to persuade and present it to the group. I created a model infographic as an example and students made theirs (See Figures 8 and 9).



Figure 8. Model Infographic



Figure 9. Samples of Students' Persuasive Posters

Meanwhile, students began their own independent research on topics they chose, which included topics such as Google Doodlers, Navy Seals, How Burt's Bees Started, Dogs, John Cena, and Kids' Paintball. I assumed the role of facilitator as I worked to support the independent research of each student. One student was interested in planes, specifically Boeing. I was able to connect with a distant family member who works for Boeing and secure a video interview via Zoom. Students all had a chance to send questions ahead of time to our guest. Each student read a question during our interview, and additional opportunities to ask questions arose. The student used this interview to launch his project and included additional research he found.

Another student chose to write about dogs. She interviewed a retired law enforcement officer (with his dog) about being a K-9 handler during our class Zoom meeting one day. Students also had a chance to ask questions and engage in this interview as well.



Figure 10. Title Pages of Student Presentations

Though I did not require students to use a particular medium to share their work, Google Slides became the chosen way after one student's presentation. I was clear to tell families this was not required and offered help as needed (See Figure 10).

Unexpected Gifts

Admittedly, this was an extremely ambitious undertaking but rewarding in so many ways. The potentially difficult time of isolation became an opportunity for me (and my own children) to connect with children across the state. As an early literacy coach, I service 8 elementary

schools across 2,400 square miles. My daily work with adults is important because what we accomplish together improves the educational experience for children. This experience of teaching my own classes online enabled me to meet children and families from communities within the area I service that I would not normally encounter in the field. Engaging with children and teachers throughout the state of Michigan (and Ohio, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts) was a gift. The opportunity to teach students again in my own "class" gave me a joy I can't describe. In a short time, we created our own community of learners within the different classes and looked forward to seeing each other. Despite these positive outcomes, there were challenges and limitations in this process.

Limitations

Time

Initially, some teachers attended to get ideas about how to teach remotely. I began teaching 5 days a week, but as schools and teachers became more prepared to teach in a distance setting and Zoom meeting demands grew for children, everyone became busier, so I combined offerings and reduced the days I taught. After five weeks it was evident that children and families had too much to manage, so I stopped offering classes, but continued to post on my Facebook page to connect and share updates and useful resources.

Student data and prior rapport

I did not know all the children or their families that participated in the classes and needed to establish that from scratch online. I also did not have specific data in front of me to inform my instruction or know where children were in their school curriculum. As such, my course offerings weren't able to meet the individual needs of children in the way I had hoped; however, as I quickly began learning about each child, I was able to adapt my instruction to meet the collective needs of the groups I taught.

Organization

Creating the online structure, keeping up with daily registrations through the Google Forms, and creating calendar invitations with secure Zoom links was more time-consuming than I anticipated. In addition, there

was a learning curve to figure out how to set up a Facebook Business Page and integrate other software to keep things organized. Some days I was more successful than others.

Student Age Range and Attrition

Some classes had a wide range of grade levels. Despite this, most students were engaged throughout and joining these classes by choice (as far as I know). I asked for their feedback on classes and aimed to meet their requests. Some students did not continue to come and some parents communicated why, but others left without any communication. The families that did write to me explained their child had more work coming from school and attending classes with me were becoming too difficult. Attrition over time was something I expected and understood as my own children's teachers began to send more work for them to complete.

Internet Access

Not all students or teachers have access to the internet so I could not offer this service to all families. My own household does not have high-speed internet; we use hotspots that have limited data. Even with more data, hotspots can be quirky at times. This interfered with classes a few times. Most times it went fine on my end, though some students had glitches I could not fix. Not being attached to a particular school for the entire group of students was challenging because there were many different types of technology being utilized.

Lessons learned

We need to get internet for every family

I continue to advocate for our students and families for internet service. A lack of internet affects students' access to education; an inequality we can't afford to ignore.

Creating community and giving explicit instruction via distance is possible

While it is not ideal, it is possible to create a community of learners from a distance and build rapport by getting to know our students, being transparent about expectations, clearly outlining the purpose, offering choices, and defining success criteria. This experience

also taught me that we can create community locally, but also within and across states. In order to do this, systems have to be in place and children need to know how to use the technology in front of them. In addition, short and clear communications with families about what children will be doing and what they will need sets everyone up for success.

Implementing practices that foster motivation and engagement is essential to build a learning community. For resources to support planning with this, view the suite of Literacy Essentials at (<https://literacyessentials.org/>), particularly Essential 1. Consider participating in the free online modules through Michigan Virtual (<https://literacyessentials.org/literacyessentials/online-modules/>) which provide research-supported content and videos to foster motivation and engagement (among other literacy areas). In addition, the book *No More Teaching Without Positive Relationships* by Jaleel R. Howard, Tanya Milner-McCall, and Tyrone C. Howard, Ph.D. offers insights on relationship-building with purpose.

I had the privilege of offering these classes with great deal of autonomy using *Literacy Essentials* and Michigan ELA Standards to guide me. Teaching online has challenges that may or may not be in our control. My experience taught me to address as many goals as possible in an authentic, research-supported way to maximize time in an online setting.

Conclusion

We know so much more now than we did when I jumped into this in March of 2020. We also have some support to help us going into next school year; a construct that remains undefined and ever-evolving. Dr. Nell K. Duke created some online video tutorials to support teachers with ideas to teach explicitly via distance in ways that align to research-supported practices which can be found at <https://literacyessentials.org/literacy-essentials/remote-learning-resources/>. In addition, many literacy coaches (myself included) and other instructional leaders are working on ways to support teachers in the upcoming school year with remote learning if needed.

As we continue to go forward, not knowing what education will look like post-pandemic, we will continue to need to be responsive, flexible, and communicative. I am appreciative to the families that allowed me the opportunity to work with their children and am equally grateful to every teacher and administrator for their diligence and commitment to children throughout this challenging time.

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Author Biography

Annie Petrozzelli Spear has been in the field of education for over 20 years and holds a Master of Education in Reading and a Master of Arts in Elementary Education. She taught in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Michigan. She is an Early Literacy Coach at C.O.O.R. Intermediate School District, consultant, and co-author of *Let's Talk: Getting Your Baby Ready to Read*. Annie was a Principal Investigator and Reading Clinic Coordinator for The Literacy Center at Central Michigan University where she remains an adjunct faculty member. Annie aims to facilitate learning around literacy development and to provide actionable ways for educators to meet children's needs through research-supported practices. She has a passion for engaging and collaborating with families in authentic ways linked to literacy research. She lives with her family in Northern Michigan and can be reached at anniespear@gmail.com.

