Cultivating staff culture online: How Edith Bowen Laboratory School responded to COVID-19

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Abstract

Purpose: As educators across the globe are tasked with taking teaching online, this article shares a culture-centered approach to transitioning to education at a distance. Specifically, in this essay, a focus is placed on how one school preserved their collaborative culture among administrators, teachers, and staff. The purpose is to provide guidance to school leadership during this public health crisis.

Approach: To ensure trustworthiness in this naturalistic inquiry, a triangulation was made of contributing authors' perspectives to present theory-informed insights.

Findings: This school's transition to online education was guided by a shared goal to not only move content online, but also a rich participatory culture among staff. Critical forms of participation and community practices are presented that were pivotal in supporting teachers through the transition. Insights equip school leaders and administrators potentially remaining online, at least in part, through the next school year.

Originality: New administrator-level insights are contributed regarding the organizational shift to teaching elementary school online, a minimally-researched topic.

Practical Implications: Schools undergoing the shift to teaching online should attend to cultural shifts and create conditions in which staff members can collaborate at higher levels.

In a staff meeting on Friday, March 6, teachers and administrators at the Edith Bowen Laboratory School (EBLS), a public charter elementary school in the western United States, began discussing how they might teach students remotely if schools closed to slow the spread of COVID-19. By the following Wednesday, closing seemed imminent, and professional learning plans for Thursday were quickly changed to a new topic: How to teach online. Fortunately, this school's sixth grade teachers were already using a learning management system (Canvas) in a blended instructional format and agreed to train other staff the next day. While administrators focused on creating student accounts and resurrecting Chromebooks from a surplus pile, teachers in grades 3 through 6 began teaching each other how to build online courses, relying heavily on the 6th grade experts. Lower elementary teachers chose a slightly different route with Google Classroom and the Google suite to share learning material with parents who would soon support their young students' learning at home.

Then, on Friday, March 13th, the governor announced school closures statewide and the need to teach online became official. In order for online instruction to begin Tuesday, school administrators and teachers at EBLS drafted messages to parents and shared a plan to distribute materials and Chromebooks the following Monday to families. Online instruction would begin Tuesday. Staff worked through the weekend to have everything ready and nearly all families showed up to collect materials on distribution Monday. Tuesday morning (and every morning following) school staff met together on Zoom for a half hour, then each teacher hosted their first video conference meetings with their classes. EBLS, founded over 90 years ago, had gone online.

Introduction

While there exists a rich collection of work investigating online teaching and learning, there remains minimal research on the challenges of teaching online at the elementary level. This is likely due to the small numbers of elementary students historically engaging in online schooling, compared to secondary and college-level students (Archambault and Crippen, 2009). The current pandemic situation, however, has drastically increased K-6 participation in online learning and thousands of elementary educators across the globe have been forced to teach online as a result of school closures. These unique circumstances have created an opportunity to learn from the decisions schools and educators made as they moved their instruction online.

In this paper, we share the story of how the Edith Bowen Laboratory School (EBLS), a K-6 public charter school on campus at Utah State University, shifted to remote teaching and learning. Our goal is to contribute new understandings regarding the delivery of elementary education online. Rooted in an ethos informed by participatory culture (Jenkins *et al.*, 2006) and communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), we share our approach of shifting our *culture,* not just *content,* into online spaces. In particular, we identify five specific forms of participation and community practices that administrators, teachers, and staff employed to preserve our culture through the transition to online, including a "situation room," daily staff meetings, leveraging existing expertise, openly sharing ideas, and preserving place-based learning online. Since this pandemic-induced transition is unique and, hopefully, a single moment in history, we tease apart pandemic-related issues and attempt to distill overarching insights that would inform elementary educators' transition to online teaching more generally. We hope that our culture-centered approach and theory-informed practical insights will equip school leaders and administrators potentially remaining online, at least in part, through the next school year.

Ethos of EBLS

EBLS is a public charter school that serves 358 students in grades K-6. We have a threefold mission of implementing best practices, mentoring student teachers, and conducting and disseminating education research. Our staff typically comprises six administrators, 22 teachers and specialists, 16 aides, three office staff, and a nutritional staff. Of our 358 students, 22% are economically disadvantaged and 16% have a disability and individualized educational program (IEP). Eighty-five percent of our students self-identify as White, 5% as multiple ethnicities, 6% as Hispanic or Latino, 2% as Asian, 1% as Black or African American, and 1% as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.

Our ethos at EBLS is one of caring for the whole child and creating a life-long love of learning. We strive to facilitate learning in real-life contexts through place-based learning, which prioritizes learning concepts in local community settings (Sobel, 2013), while simultaneously emphasizing personalized core academic instruction. Our students and faculty frequently embark on field experiences to local parks, canyons, museums, and for- and non-profit organizations [I]. In addition to whole-class instruction, each student at EBLS also participates in intensive and targeted small group instruction four days a week in reading and math. Teachers hold themselves and their students to high expectations and work hard to support each individual in achieving them.

As school leaders, we seek to create the same experiences for our teachers that we wish to create for students. We take our staff canoeing and on overnight retreats in the mountains. In a value-mapping activity led by the Director of EBLS (Author 1), we identified shared values and beliefs. Together we recognized that we value and believe in teacher autonomy *and* doing certain

things unitedly, a balance of direct and exploratory instruction, and all students can learn and contribute something unique and valuable to the world. Knowing we had so many beliefs and values in common has empowered us to move forward with increased trust in and respect for one another. We did not know at the time how well that trust would serve us when faced with the challenge to go online.

Transitioning a Culture

To preserve our valued ethos, we expanded the grain-size of the experience we sought to transition to online beyond curricular content and student learning objectives to include our school's culture. Naturally, we wanted to continue to engage students in personalized and place-based learning, even while at home. As school leaders, we wanted to do the same for our staff. We wanted to maintain the feeling of a learning community, respect staff members' autonomy and unique skills, and support them as challenges arose. In order for our transition to be sustainable for an indefinite period of time, we had to work together to figure out how to maintain and further cultivate the rich culture that makes up EBLS.

Collaboration has long been a part of our culture. Most teachers have been to a national conference on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs; DuFour *et al.*, 2010) and studied books on developing highly effective PLCs. We normally gather weekly as grade level PLC teams, and as a school every other week, to talk about progress and plans. Our PLC teams vary in levels of structure and formality due to the different personalities comprising each team. Despite these differences, the desire and need to meet collaboratively each week is consistent in nearly every grade. This foundation was important as we made the shift online.

Maintaining and growing this culture of trust and frequent collaboration became the key focus of our leadership early on in the transition to online learning. We identified the five forms of participation and community practices below as most impactful through informal discussion and reflection amongst the authors. While each form had a unique impact on our organization, overlaps of engagement exist within them. For example, instances of leveraging existing expertise frequently occurred during daily staff meetings. We conclude with brief suggestions of application in other settings and trust the reader to make more detailed adaptations within their own context.

Approach

While the broader context of these efforts are part of an ongoing design-based implementation research study (Coburn and Penuel, 2016), in this essay we share our current theory-informed insights to immediately inform practice given the urgency of the need for guidance. To ensure trustworthiness in our naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), we triangulated contributing authors' perspectives. Authors include two school administrators (Author 1 and 3), a teacher (Author 4), and a researcher-partner (Author 2). Given time and COVID-19 constraints, we chose to triangulate our perspectives through comments on a shared document to ensure that narratives and findings represent and resonate with all authors. A draft was also shared with EBLS employees for member-checking.

Forms of Participation and Community Practices

Our strategies for maintaining the ethos and practices of our participatory culture and community in an online setting included engaging in new forms of participation and cultivating

shared community practices. Here we outline the strategies that our administrators, teachers, and staff identified as most critical in this transition.

The situation room

Information was constantly changing during the first few days. We naturally came together in what came to be referred to as the "situation room." One administrator (Author 3) reports:

> "In the first days of this transition, as we were all still at school, the entire atmosphere of communication and collaboration intensified. The administrative team established the "situation room" where we were centralized and available for a constant barrage of needs and questions. As information rolled out we would come together, share, and then roll back into motion. However, the major change came in the intense and ongoing need to discuss and problem-solve together. Teachers were in constant communication with one another questioning what others were going to do, how they were going to do it, and reaching out with issues to resolve. The energy in their communication was driven and focused. Some were able to talk through plans, see what needed to be done and execute. Others saw the immensity of the problem, the volumes of resources being sent their way, and felt overwhelmed. Whether the first or the latter, all teachers looked to their PLC team, their administrative team, and others for support. They needed those voices and hands to move through the work and process the problems. A major shift was in the purpose of these teams."

I (Author 1) also used the situation room to take in information and make assignments as necessary. We designed a new school-level communication system with parents, which included a page on our website and a tech support ticketing system for parents using Google Forms.

Daily meetings

To make sure we moved forward in unity, we decided to require all staff to meet with us on Zoom every morning for 25-30 minutes until further notice (this practice was never discontinued). Previously, we only met 2-3 times a month as a whole staff. These morning meetings now also included classroom aides. The frequency and necessity of our interactions as a staff drew us closer together, even though we were physically separated. I (Author 1) noted in a journal entry,

> "Reflecting on our morning staff meetings - one staff member told me a couple of weeks into this that they thought meeting every day would be too much, but they soon realized it was good for us to see each other and maintain a sense of community. At least one or two other staff members told me how they looked forward to seeing everyone each morning. One said it was her favorite part of the day."

Our daily morning staff meetings were, at the start, a space for sharing updates and discussing plans. After the first week or two, our purposes evolved to sharing lessons learned and challenges encountered. Then, it became a time for discussing the quality and quantity of what we were expecting of students. By May, these meetings turned into discussions of end-of-year activities, and, finally, simply checking in on one another. To specialize these conversations, we

split the morning meeting early on into upper and lower elementary discussion groups one day, and randomized small groups of 4-5 people the next. We alternated to provide variation of social engagement and allow for specialized conversations. At each stage of this transition, these meetings helped to maintain a professional learning culture and provided staff with much-needed social interaction.

Leveraging existing expertise

Collectively, our staff had the skills necessary to shift to teaching online. Our 6th grade team was already teaching with Canvas and all of our teachers had Google accounts. The day before our state governor announced schools were closing, we asked the 6th grade team to train teachers in grades 3-5 on teaching with Canvas, while lower elementary teachers began loading course materials in Google Drive and Google Classroom. Upper and lower groups took different approaches to organizing and disseminating material, because younger students (grades K-2) would access learning materials via parents while older students could directly access materials in our existing learning management system. Teachers felt Google Drive and Google Classroom would be easier for parents of younger students to manage. Our school had a secure domain through Google prior to the pandemic and state data security officers had previously indicated Google Suite met privacy standards. For these reasons, we did not hesitate to create accounts for students in grades K-2 and share this account information with parents to use to access Google Drive and Google Classroom.

The demands of moving everything online and embracing the unknown compelled us to deepen our collaborative culture. We were suddenly bound together facing a common and urgent problem. This took away some of the imbalances in experience and expertise and allowed us to find our route together. Teachers asked one another for help—they walked into rooms and said, "teach me," and openly admitted when they didn't know the next step.

As we moved past the first few days of triage, our need for collaboration and communication again shifted. Because teachers were now facing this new reality alone, they found multiple ways to seek help and collaborate. The assistant principal (third author) reflected:

> "I found my phone constantly buzzing. Teachers were calling, texting, and zooming all day. They needed someone to question, brainstorm with, and provide reassurance. This was unfamiliar territory and they could not, or did not want to, navigate it alone. Despite being separated we still needed a community of practice. We worked hard to learn to collaborate in this new setting. I am not sure if that is what prepared us for this moment, or if teachers encountering a common crisis reach out and grab onto each other. Either way, we have reached out. We have not gone it alone. Our school has become stronger together even when we are farther apart."

Openly sharing ideas

As a small school our faculty is close. We are used to being one another's sounding board and do not hesitate to grab someone in the hall when we have a question or a need. As a community we work together to plan and prepare our curriculum and achieve the mission of the school, but never to the level that occurred when school shifted online. A key cultural move we made during the shift was to encourage and increase this type of collaboration from a distance. We knew that within our organization, we had the collective intelligence necessary to make this transition, but these skills needed to be quickly disseminated or strategically assigned.

We intentionally invited teachers to share insights and skills in morning meetings and elsewhere so that others might appropriate these ideas and incorporate them into their own instructional design work. One example of this was when a teacher designed a "choice board" [II] of learning activities, which subsequently became a popular practice amongst staff.

A great deal of professional learning occurred as a result of these efforts to tap into our collective intelligence. For example, a fourth grade teacher at EBLS (Author 4), explained, "I have unlocked some possibilities for how students can personalize their learning in ways I didn't have the courage to dream about before."

In a staff meeting, team members built a list of over 100 technical and adaptive skills they had developed over the previous 8 weeks (see Figure 1). These skills ranged from the use of digital tools to the alteration of curriculum to meet the changing needs of students.
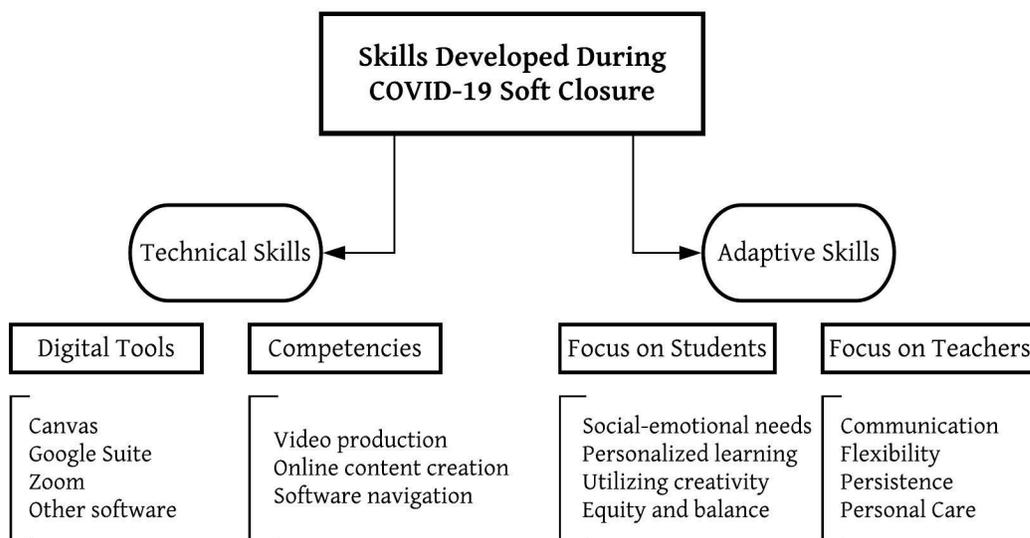
Figure 1: Skills developed by teachers during COVID-19

Place-based learning online

Since our school is rooted in place-based and experiential learning, (re)envisioning what this means when teaching across different places was a significant challenge for us. At EBLS, we share a belief in striking a delicate balance between engaging students outside and leveraging technology to mediate that engagement. In the first few weeks, members of our leadership team recognized that by holding classes via Zoom, students would have much more screen time than usual and, thus, worked to support teachers to find a new balance. Through constructive and collaborative problem-solving, teachers began taking advantage of the home setting as a new "place" to learn by (re)designing students assignments to include short walks in their neighborhood or science experiments with kitchen supplies. Our fourth grade teacher (Author 4) adds, "We focused on the opportunities we could provide for our students to appreciate their own places, their backyards, what we would call their 'peace place.'"

Interestingly, teachers opened up their own homes and personal spaces as places of learning with their students as well. One teacher in isolation at his cabin strapped on his snowshoes and ventured out along the river to record a video of himself telling tales of mountaineer John Colter for our now-virtual 4th Grade Rendezvous. Another teacher led a

square dancing activity from her living room for this same event. Through this free sharing of home settings as places of learning, we opened up a new dimension of vulnerability between teachers and students, which helped to break down barriers between school and home and maintain our culture of place-based learning.

Insights for School Leaders

Our goal during this pandemic-induced transition was to maintain and strengthen our *professional learning culture* so we might continue to provide valuable learning experiences for students at home that aligned with our core beliefs about learning. To accomplish this, we had to move content and culture online. We needed time together to listen to each other and problem solve together. We needed multiple channels for idea sharing and troubleshooting. In response to these needs, we perpetuated an emphasis on place-based learning and sought to break down barriers between home and school. We also created an expectation of daily engagement that included idea-sharing, which resulted in high amounts of learning across staff members. Instead of layering professional development on top of our regularly scheduled meetings, our learning became the core focus of our scheduled and spontaneous interactions out of necessity. These forms of participation align with Jenkins *et al.*'s (2006) forms of participatory culture: affiliations (through our high-frequency contact with each other), expressions (e.g. new variations of place-based learning), collaborative problem solving (by leveraging existing expertise and openly sharing ideas), and circulations (of solutions and skills).

Our current insights confirm that schools can successfully navigate significant challenges, such as shifting to teaching online, when they intentionally ensure perpetuation of cultural values and social engagement. These challenges can serve as opportunities for learning and growth when seen as such. This pandemic period and its resultant school closures created an opportunity for us to grow closer together as a staff, instead of further apart. Our participatory culture was strengthened and we became a more tightly-knit community of practice. We anticipate this increased collaborative culture will continue to benefit our work moving forward and recommend similar actions to other schools undergoing significant shifts such as we experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we recommend attending to and strengthening culture through increased engagement and knowledge sharing like that found within participatory cultures and communities of practice.

[I] See https://edithbowen.usu.edu/contribute/ryker for more information.
[II] See https://blog.tcea.org/choice-boards-2/ or https://theartofeducation.edu/2012/07/11/how-to-use-choice-boards-to-differentiate-learning/ for more information.

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