Tips for Teaching "Live Lessons" During the Coronavirus. By Bill Ferriter

I've got a ton of tips for Gabe — and for anyone else interested in holding "live classes" in digital spaces, but first, a few caveats:

Start by knowing that I teach eighth graders. That means my students are capable of sustaining attention and working without a lot of support from parents at home. That, in and of itself, gives me an advantage over anyone teaching younger students.

A large proportion of my students also come from middle class families. That also gives me an advantage because it means that many of my students aren't facing the kinds of life challenges that kids living in poverty right now are facing. The kids in my live lessons have the bandwidth for coming to an optional school session because they aren't worrying about where their next meal is going to come from or whether or not their parents are going to be able to pay the rent and the electric bill.

Finally, I am lucky enough to have both a daughter who is old enough to work independently at home AND a wife who is home most of the time to supervise her learning. That frees me up to do a TON more prep work and delivery than many of my peers who are juggling trying to deliver content to their students AND support the learning of their own children.

So those three factors explain some of the results that I'm getting off the bat — and I don't want you to doubt the efficacy of your work if you are working with younger students, much higher percentages of students who are living in difficult circumstances, or wrestling with more family responsibilities at home than I am.

That being said, here are a few things that I think are working in my live lessons:

I make sure to notice every student who shows up: As they enter our "digital room," I say hello to every kid individually. I joke with them about their profile pics. I complement their bedrooms (if they have their webcams on). I ask about their siblings. I ask them to bring a pet to class and show it to us.

There's nothing remarkable here, right? All kids want to be noticed.

But that's even MORE important in a time when students' lives have been turned upside down. Many of our kids aren't getting noticed as much as they need. Parents are busy and overwhelmed, juggling jobs while simultaneously trying to keep kids busy for hours on end. Students aren't interacting socially as much as usual — sporting practices have been cancelled, school isn't happening, cousins and grandparents aren't visiting.

So let your kids know that you SEE them in your rooms — even if they don't turn on their webcams or grab the mic in your sessions. Doing so will make them feel like they BELONG in your online class — and will make them want to come back again.

I make sure to create lots of chances for students to "participate": I ask LOTS of questions in my live lessons — and have students respond by writing answers in chat boxes. I also

use Socrative to survey my students during my live lessons, knowing that answering survey questions is an easy, "entry-level" participatory task.

When I see interesting answers shared by students, either I will call them out for the entire group to notice OR I will have that student "grab the mic" and share their thinking with the entire room.

I'm also trying to incorporate some element of creation in each live lesson. For example, yesterday I had my students use Padlet to build a KWL sharing what they knew and wanted to know about fossils. Then, I had them react to comments left by others — either by "upvoting" or responding to thoughts that resonated with them.

There's no surprise here, either, right?

If we want kids to be engaged in live lessons, we need to make those live lessons as participatory as possible. The fact of the matter is that our students are surrounded by distractions right now — so if our live lessons are passive, we can't be surprised when our kids are drawn away to do other things.

I'm asking lots of provocative questions: Live lessons in our district are optional. No student can be required to attend them — and no teacher can offer new instruction in synchronous sessions. New instruction has to be recorded and posted so that students can access that content at a time that works with their personal schedules.

That means drawing kids to an online class is tricky. As a teacher, I have to give them a reason to want to come because they literally don't have to.

So I've concentrated on trying to choose the most interesting content in my curriculum and to frame that content through the lens of provocative questions. The way I figure, provocative questions are hooks, bringing kids to class because they want to share their own thinking and compare it to the thinking of others.

Here's an example of a provocative question that we talked about in a recent meeting: Should pastors be arrested for offering church services during the Coronavirus?

Here's another: What's the point of fossils anyway? Can something be interesting AND important?

Probably the BEST part of remote teaching is that we have to scale WAY back on the content that we are delivering to kids. There's just no way to get through everything in our required curricula when kids aren't even sitting in our classrooms. That means we have the freedom to focus on what is MOST interesting to our students. Use that freedom, y'all, to pick out things in your curriculum that you KNOW your kids are going to want to learn more about.

Those three tips are probably the MOST important things that I can offer you in the form of advice about how to increase participation rates in your live lessons.

Kids have to feel noticed, they have to have chances to participate, and they have to be genuinely interested in the content that you are sharing if they are going to come to your class again and again during the Coronavirus.

Notice that these tips have nothing to do with the technology that you are using. My kids aren't coming to class because they want to build a Padlet or play with Google Meet. They are coming for connections — to me, to each other and to interesting ideas.

But I do have a few tech/logistical tips for you:

Do all that you can to make sure that your sessions aren't digital disasters for kids: Yesterday, the sheer number of students in my live lesson actually became a problem for some. Google Meet — the platform we are using — became glitchy for many of my kids. Some were getting audio and video that was lagging. Others were getting kicked out of the room and having to log back in.

That CAN'T happen if I want my students to ever come back to a live lesson. If it's not a good digital experience, they will just skip the sessions and watch the recordings.

So next week, I'm going to offer the same lesson twice — and let the students choose the time that they want to attend. That should result in fewer kids in the room and less technical challenges for everyone. It also means that kids can pick a session that fits with their personal schedules. It means twice as much work for me, but that's worth it if the kids have a positive experience and want to come back again next week.

Keep your live lessons short and sweet: Every one of the live lessons that I've offered so far last for 45 minutes. That's about 15 minutes shorter than a regular class would last — but it is at the outer edge of the attention span for kids sitting on their beds or in their living rooms.

It also means that class runs at a fast pace. We move from idea to idea pretty quickly — and that fast pace gives me a better chance of keeping the attention of my kids for the entire session. Finally, it means my kids are more likely to attend because they aren't being asked to give up an inordinate amount of time.

Have a clear agenda for every live lesson — and stick to it: When kids know that there is a plan for your live lesson, they are more likely to attend — both by coming and by paying attention and participating. My agendas are always posted in Google Classroom before the live lesson happens AND in Google Meet before the activity starts.

The live lessons that become disasters are those that are open and unstructured. Just inviting kids to come and ask any questions that they have will result in a lot of quiet kids wondering why they wasted their time to come and learn from you.

Have every kid mute their mics AND turn on their cameras (if they have one): Muting mics is essential, y'all. By now, you've learned that the hard way. Who hasn't been in a Zoom faculty meeting where one colleague forgets to mute their mic, subjecting everyone to the background noise from their homes? Or in a Zoom faculty meeting where multiple people are trying to talk at once and everyone is stuck trying to follow the conversation.

The problem becomes exponentially worse when you've got 90 middle schoolers in the same digital room! But the solution is a breeze – start every session with a reminder that mics should be muted and that you will call on people directly to share their thinking. Your kids will get used to that routine.

I also recommend that you ask students to turn on their video cameras, too. You should never require that — students can be sensitive about letting you "see" into their homes.

But if kids are willing to do it, you will gain a ton of information about whether or not the content that you are sharing is resonating with kids just by seeing the reactions to your lesson on their faces. We use those nonverbal cues in class to make choices all the time — why wouldn't we do it in an online lesson, too.

It also gives kids the chance to see the reactions of their peers AND it makes your online lesson feel more like a "class." Both of those things are important messages to send to kids if we are ever going to normalize remote lessons.