

Change Can Be for the Better

Each quarantine morning, my day began promptly at 7 a.m. with a steaming mug of black coffee and a few pages of my AP Spanish reading assignment, *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba*. Each morning started the same, whether it was followed by a Zoom call with my U.S. history teacher, assigned problems from my precalculus textbook, or an outdoor AP exam study session. I treasured this morning ritual, my only link to my beloved rigid schedule of the pre-coronavirus era. I created other rules for myself, too, to keep myself from spiraling into the void of uncertainty and existentialism. Spend no more than four hours on your phone per day. Study something, anything, from each of your classes every day. These guidelines shaped my amorphous, unscheduled quarantine life into some semblance of directed study, in the absence of the oversight of my teachers and administrators. What most pulled me into my studies, however, was the looming shadow of AP exam dates, the only item populating my calendar for the foreseeable future. These exams became the object of my study hours, something to work toward after the disappearing act of finals and other cumulative markers, such as the spring musical, math competitions, and NHS inductions. These exams gave me a purpose to my study, and that purpose made all the difference.

In order for students to maintain motivation to complete their studies and remain engaged with their education, they need a purpose to complete them. This was simpler in the pre-COVID age, when varsity sports practices and school dances were off limits to students with failing grades or overwhelming absences. To help virtual learners stay connected, schools can organize benchmarks and goals to work toward. Some of these goals could obviously be academic; for instance, a benchmark assessment or project at the end of each week might motivate students more than an endless onslaught of new, unrelated worksheets assigned to fill the time. Students

in want of extracurriculars could benefit from related motivators, such as virtual club outings in the form of online competitions or chance to meet via Zoom with their peers. Another method of boosting motivation could come through partnerships between schools and community organizations. During in person school, our classes benefitted from a partnership with ABC Today. Students with perfect attendance or passing grades were periodically rewarded with treats for their effort. A similar program could be developed for virtual learning: students with near-perfect attendance to Zoom classes might receive a coupon to a local restaurant chain, or students who complete all assignments on time could have a small reward brought to their door.

However, even the most motivated student will not have a successful virtual learning experience without access. Many students lack access to consistent Wi-Fi, or any Wi-Fi at all. Other students are sharing a screen with siblings, or looking after them between Zoom calls. The difficulties of learning at home abound, but if a student doesn't have access to their class, they cannot be expected to learn. Schools should provide access when possible through pop-up hotspots across the district and with 1:1 device programs. However, we also need to reformulate the norms of learning for the virtual setting. Students will be more motivated by scheduled Zoom calls and deadlines, but we must also recognize that there needs to be asynchronous availability of assignments and instruction. By posting lesson overviews to learning management platforms, providing notes from each day's lecture, and being available for one-on-one conferencing at certain times, teachers can help students overcome the barrier of technology.

By providing access and motivation, school districts can elevate virtual learning to the point where it positively impacts student progress. However, we cannot expect virtual learning to be like in-person education. When students learn virtually, they are under entirely different circumstances, and we must keep this in mind. Virtual learning is a distinct method of education,

and it will not work if we try to fit it into the box of traditional education. However, by prioritizing motivation and access, virtual learning can be an effective method of instruction.