Chapter 4
Connectedness Despite Disruption:
Pandemic Partnerships for Innovation in K–12 Online Learning Communities

Aimee L. Whiteside
University of Tampa, USA

April Fleetwood
Florida Virtual School, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the unique position of those already well versed in technology during the COVID-19 lockdown and how their expertise became imperative to the success of more novice educators. Through the lens of disruptive innovation, this chapter details the how the pandemic advanced one innovative partnership of experts from a virtual school, the Regional Education Lab, and a university. It addresses how they collaborated to help educators understand the importance of social presence for students during a pandemic and how to better support their students in this difficult time. Ultimately, this chapter underscores that the disruption story does not come from educators implementing new technologies, but rather from seizing the opportunity to partner and learn solutions together that push innovation forward.

INTRODUCTION

For most educators, emergency remote learning was trial by fire, as we struggled with new learning platforms and communication strategies to support our learners during a pandemic. But for me, the start of emergency remote learning was, literally, trial by fire.

After working almost non-stop for four days, Wednesday through Sunday, I finally posted my online learning lessons at 3:43 a.m. Monday morning. In a state of pure mental and emotional exhaustion, I collapsed, almost lifeless, into the warm, rewarding hug of my bed. I shut my eyes and exhaled deeply. It seemed like only seconds later, there was headache-worthy pounding above my head. Loud and intense,

it was almost like the house was about to implode. The sirens came next. I forced myself awake, and I stumbled forward, still woozy and dysfunctional from the mental and physical exhaustion of the previous few days. As I looked through the decorative glass in our front door, a blurred outline of a fire truck right outside my front door met my disbelieving gaze. I opened the door, and the fire chief whipped his head around, clearly surprised to see me. With alarm in his eyes, he asked if anyone else was in the house. I answered that my kids were all home. With great urgency, he said gruffly, "Get them out of the house…now!" I quickly shepherded my three groggy, grumpy kids and our dog, Brody, to my neighbor's house. The pounding had been the roofers; today—today of all days—was the starting date of our roofing project. The roofers had accidently hit a corroded pipe with some old shingles, exposing dripping gas. As I looked down at my Fitbit, I saw that it was now the start time for one of my classes and realized I had no way to communicate with my students. And was my house about to go up in flames along with the chaos that had suddenly become pandemic teaching?

It is trial by fire stories like this one that help us understand the stress and need for support and connectedness for educators during the pandemic. This type of urgency ultimately led to our pandemic partnership. As we think back to the March 2020 global lockdown, it did not seem possible that we could be living in a pandemic similar to the Spanish Flu in the early 20th century. Instead, the whole lockdown process seemed more like a scene from a low-budget movie. None of it seemed real.

The magnitude of the situation was not lost on those of us in education; we understood the job at hand. We immediately shifted into overdrive. Suddenly, we understood the softness and hardness of time represented by the melting watches in Dali's paintings. The surreal became real. As time slowed for some, it picked up at an exponential pace for educators.

Academic leaders and instructional technologists were immediately tasked to develop emergency plans and move their districts and schools to emergency remote learning (Petersen et al., 2020) as well as consider the opportunity cost of no on-site school on low-income, food insecure families and children with diverse learning needs (Kinsey et al., 2021). Parents adjusted their schedules to help their kids through the transition as they continued their own work remotely when possible. Teachers were challenged to move their courses online with very limited professional development. They latched onto any free professional development networks and opportunities that became available through their districts, professional associations, or global organizations, hoping to help their students transition as smoothly as possible (Cavanaugh & DeWeese, 2020).

As we all raced toward competency with various technologies, the instructors who were most successful in this process were not necessarily technology innovators. That is because the disruption story is not about the COVID-19 lockdown or the technologies teachers used. Instead, the true disruption was that kindergarten through twelfth grade (K–12) education needed low-cost, easy-to-use solutions that were readily, freely, and immediately available for stressed families, some with limited computer access and wireless bandwidth. The innovation, in this case, often came in the form of partnerships to gather quick advice and put something into practice immediately. The next sections address the disruption innovation framework, its origin, and its application for K–12 education.

DISRUPTIVE INNOVATION

Coined by Clayton Christensen in 1995 based on trends in business and industry, disruptive innovation refers to the process whereby a smaller disrupting force helps spawn innovation. Christensen and his

7 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/connectedness-despite-disruption/292173

Related Content

Distance Learning and Educational Technology in Malaysia
Habibah Latehand Arumugam Raman (2005). *Encyclopedia of Distance Learning (pp. 641-653).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/distance-learning-educational-technology-malaysia/12170

Fast Prototyping as a Communication Catalyst for E-Learing Design
Luca Botturi, Lorenzo Cantoni, Benedetto Leporiand Stefano Tardini (2008). *Online and Distance Learning: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications (pp. 1014-1027).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/fast-prototyping-communication-catalyst-learing/27447

Rationale, Design and Implementation of a Computer Vision-Based Interactive E-Learning System
Richard Y.D. Xuand Jesse S. Jin (2007). *International Journal of Distance Education Technologies (pp. 26-45).*
www.irma-international.org/article/rationale-design-implementation-computer-vision/1713

Students' Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in Using Artificial Intelligence (AI) Technology in English-Speaking Practice
Bin Zou, Sitian Xieand Chenghao Wang (2025). *International Journal of Information and Communication Technology Education (pp. 1-18).*
www.irma-international.org/article/students-willingness-to-communicate-wtc-in-using-artificial-intelligence-ai-technology-in-english-speaking-practice/375387

Wikis as Individual Student Learning Tools: The Limitations of Technology
Matthew Allenand Elaine Tay (2012). *International Journal of Information and Communication Technology Education (pp. 61-71).*
www.irma-international.org/article/wikis-individual-student-learning-tools/65578