DOUG LEMOV
AND THE TEACH LIKE A CHAMPION TEAM

Teaching
in the
Online
Classroom

SURVIVING AND THRIVING IN THE NEW NORMAL

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TEACHING IN THE Online Classroom

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Introduction
Remote Teaching and the New Normal

Doug Lemov and Erica Woolway

There are a few tiny, beautiful moments in one of Eric Snider's remote English lessons with his students at Achievement First Iluminar Mayoral Academy Middle School in Cranston, Rhode Island. The class is reading Rita Williams-Garcia's *One Crazy Summer*, and Eric asks if anyone is willing to try to answer a question that they know is difficult. Eric has already told them, calmly and without judgment, that many of them misunderstood a key passage —that the question they've been asked to answer is a hard one. Many of the students are undaunted, and they volunteer. "Thanks, James. Thanks, George. Thanks, Jaylee," he says as each hand is raised. He's showing students that he sees them embrace the challenge. Soon, there are more volunteers. "Wow, ton of hands here. I appreciate it."

It's a great moment, because it reminds us how important it is for people to feel seen. Telling someone how much you appreciate what they do in the face of challenges can help bring out their best, online as much as in person.

This moment also reminds us that the act of observing others can influence people's behavior. We become—or can become—more like what we choose to observe. "The human body has about 11M sensory receptors," James Clear writes in *Atomic Habits*. "Approximately 10M of those are dedicated to sight...a small change in what you see can lead to a big shift in what you do." Good models are powerful.

The clip ends, as you will later see, with a student answering the difficult question beautifully and compellingly, from the back seat of her family's car. It's a difficult world right now, but she's managed to adapt, and she's brought her A game.

Teachers, too, have been asked to do what they know is difficult: to shift, without warning, to an unfamiliar universe—one where we interact with our students remotely, as if through a tiny keyhole in the classroom door. Each of the young people we care about now appears as a small image in the corner of our computer screen (sometimes not even that).

Nearly everything about teaching has changed for teachers over the past few months except the fact that students need us. And so it's incumbent upon us a profession to learn new methods to reach them as quickly and effectively as possible.

This book is about applying the lessons of that moment from Eric's classroom to teachers. In it we'll show you, with appreciation, tiny moments from the classes of real teachers working online. We'll share insights and discuss principles from those examples to help you adapt as successfully as possible to our "New Normal" of remote teaching or some combination of remote and classroom education. And in doing so we hope to show our appreciation for you and for the teachers whose work we share.

No one asked for the world to change this way, but it has. As teachers, that means there's work to be done. If you're reading this, you realize and embrace that fact. We're grateful to you, and our goal is to pay you back for that commitment. And the good news is that it's not just that teachers have jumped in, in the face of difficulty, and done the work. It's that they have done the work and begun to

find solutions to the difficult day-to-day challenges of remote teaching. Whenever difficulty presents itself, there is always some teacher, somewhere, who finds a solution.

FACING THE NEW NORMAL, NOW.

In facing new teaching challenges, it's important to remember that while so much of the work has changed (we all now know what Zoom is, for example), much also remains the same. The fundamentals of teaching and the relationships that we know from our previous lives still very much apply. Sometimes we just have to look harder or in different places to see it. As one friend described her life under quarantine, it is a New Normal—totally different but with at least an echo of the familiar.

Since this New Normal began, we've witnessed plenty of challenges in the "classroom"—glitchy internet; good internet but some children lacking a device to access it; students participating from hallways outside their apartments; teachers leading classes with their own children in their laps—but we have seen even more of a can-do attitude, a problem-solving embrace of situations outside our control. There is less looking back over shoulders and more turning to face the future full-on.

It's important to underscore the urgency of this attitude— the absolute necessity of getting better at what we do now, no matter the circumstances.

A recent blog post[1] by Brown University economist Emily Oster used data from her colleague John Freidman's research to show how critical the next months and years of our teaching lives will be. Friedman took data on student progress from the online math platform Zearn, charted it longitudinally, and disaggregated it by income level. Here's the chart:

Student Progress in Zearn, by School-Area Income Level
For Classrooms Using Zearn *BEFORE* the Shutdown
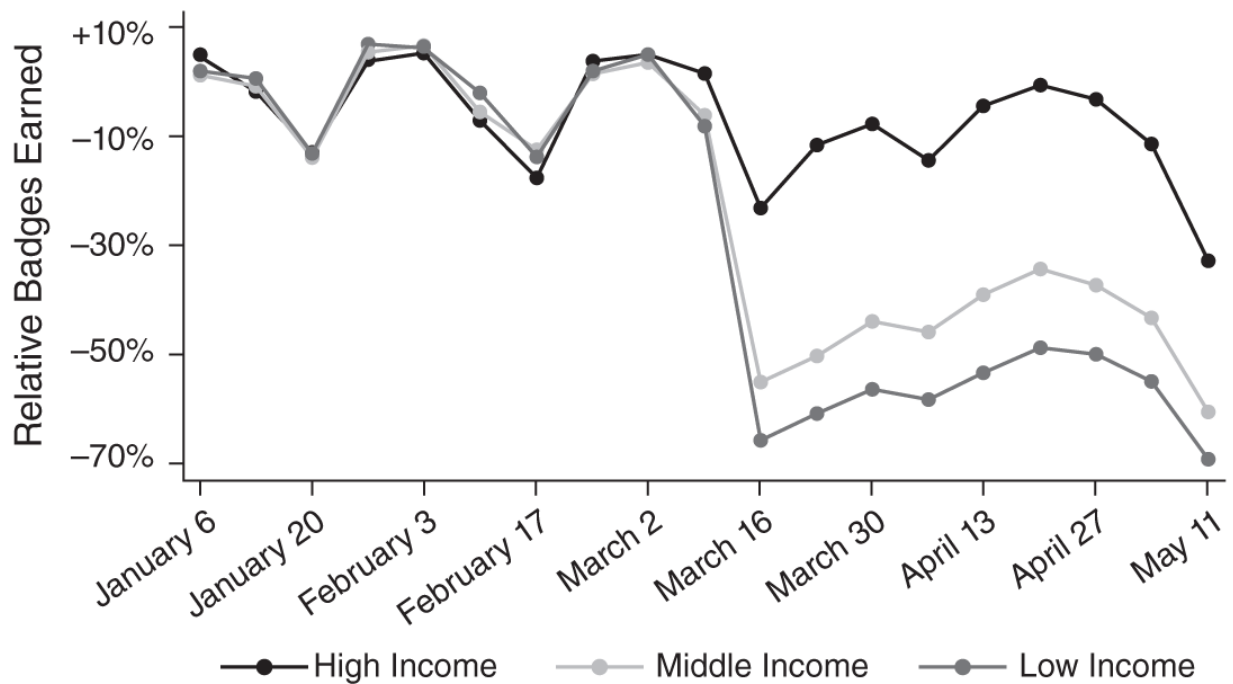
The data are based on the rate at which students who were already familiar with online learning progressed through achievement "badges" on Zearn's platform. It's an imperfect measure—on one hand, a lot of the work involves self-study of preproduced materials (asynchronous learning) rather than face-to-face remote interactions with a teacher (synchronous learning); on the other hand, it's data on students who were already doing extensive remote work, and therefore students for whom transitioning online was probably far less of a disruption than it has been for others. Badges may not be a perfect measure of learning, but they offer data that shows us very clearly how being away from classrooms has affected a large group of students in a measurable way—and allowed us to disaggregate that data by income and look for potential disparities and inequities. By those standards, the data are devastating.

"Even for students in the *best-off* districts—the higher-income ones—there is a reduction of about 10% in the badges earned," Oster wrote, "and this seems to get even worse in the most recent weeks. For students in middle- and lower-income school districts, the results are a disaster. There appears to be about a 60% drop in badges earned. That is, kids in these districts are moving through the curriculum at *less than half the pace they did while in school*" (italics in original).

The situation is urgent, but we think the big issues are addressed not insignificantly by our willingness to focus on "small" issues of craft—to improve what we do every day as teachers.

And, at the end of the day, there are some silver linings. A few things will work better online; some students will thrive more there; some things we'll learn will make us better teachers in all settings. There will be some lessons to take back to our old classrooms. We don't mean to ignore that. We just think it's important to be clear that everything we know about teaching suggests that on net the experience online will be less powerful, and what's most worrisome is that it will almost certainly be that way most for the students most at risk already.

It's all hands on deck.

A colleague, a journalist, wrote to us in the midst of the quarantine last April. What did we think was the consensus feeling of teachers? Were they excited? Did they think the future had suddenly arrived as in a day? Or were they more cynical? Were they thinking, *not another damn thing to get trained on*!?

None of the above. We thought a decent summary of the average teacher's opinion was: "This is scary, and I miss the world as it used to be—me, my classroom, my students.

But this is reality. The kids need me to be good at this, so I've got to give it my best."

Obviously, no large group of people have opinions that are so easily glossed, but this book is for those teachers who, like us, would not have chosen this course but who, faced with it, are determined to find simple, replicable ways to do it well and serve our students best. In other words, we're no futurists. We won't be making any TED Talks on the seamless, frictionless, automatic teaching future waiting for us if we could just embrace technology.

Like many (most? all?) of you, we hope to be back to classrooms soon. We have spent much of our collective careers studying them—each tiny interaction by each tiny interaction—because we think they matter so much, and because we think that classrooms are uniquely suited to build a culture around students that brings out their best. Classrooms can be a "bright mirror": a place that wraps students in a culture that draws out the best from within them, but also changes them for the better. The ideal learning environment is a classroom where your peers look at you as you share a nascent idea. Their eyes show they value it too. They listen carefully and their words, in response, make the point as well. They help you expand and refine it. Soon it's not really your idea anymore, but the group's collective thinking. Together, you come to a deeper shared understanding.

Humans are finely evolved machines for observing and responding to the other humans around them, having survived as a species by forming social groups. When we are together socially, we can draw on all of the tools that are wired in our brains that make us respond to positive culture. And while an online setting can't provide all the things a classroom can—you can never capture the feeling, for instance, of a room of 30 people hanging on one

another's words, somehow actually feeling their responses to a telling insight—the goal must be to get remote learning as close to that as possible. It needs to get across the power of listening and being heard, the way students are drawn in and caused to be engaged, on their toes, and accountable, in the most loving sense of the word, even when they may not feel like it.

On net, we believe, the experience of learning online will likely be less productive for most students than classrooms are. It may be profoundly so for many, and in a way that impacts the most vulnerable learners most. It's a sort of second, educational pandemic, and the best way to fight it, we think, is by focusing on the core of the craft: the foundational moves that shape each interaction with young people and that can improve the experience and mitigate its limitations as much as possible. The word "fundamentals" is important. We seek in online classrooms what we sought in their brick-and-mortar cousins: that which is relatively straightforward to do and easily replicated, and that which can be reused and adapted to make the learning experience richer for students. Those things are most valuable and most worth your time. And as Chip and Dan Heath remind us in one of our favorite books on change management, *Switch,* the size of the solution does not always match the size of the problem. Small changes can have profound effects. We've tried to focus on that here.

Ultimately, we're pragmatists about online learning, informed by a dose of skepticism and a profound belief in people, students, and teachers, all of which may make us useful guides. But even to our most skeptical sides, it's not all bad news. There are a few silver linings, too. We'll find out new things about ourselves and grow our abilities to teach online. We'll discuss some of those in a moment. But first, let us take a step back and tell you more about how

we came to write a book about something that, just a few short months ago, was the furthest thing from our mind.

THE CRAFT OF TEACHING

This is a good time to note that we are teachers, too, not just in the sense that we write about and study teaching, but in the sense that we spend most of our time in rooms with groups of people who we are trying to help learn things—in this case the craft of teaching.

We too were caught off guard by the sudden erasure of the classroom. We had a spring full of workshops to design and run and suddenly one day in March they were all cancelled. We wondered, should we close up shop? Hunker down and wait it out? But teaching, and teachers, were in crisis. And in the end we believe that our strength as a group lies in the group itself—our ability to learn together. This is what we'd been doing for ten years: gathering twice a week to watch video of teachers teaching, analyzing their moves and decisions in the tiniest details, and learning as much as we possibly could. If you ask us what we do, we say we study teachers. Could we turn that power on virtual classrooms? After all, one of the few advantages of virtual classrooms is ease of recording. The video had to be out there. Could we watch and study and learn?

Two days after we closed up the office and went home, we gathered—via Zoom—to watch our first batch of video of online teaching. It was from a group of kindergarten and first-grade teachers from a charter school in Brooklyn. Having woken up in a brave new world, there they were, smiling for children who really needed to see them smiling, and giving their best at teaching sight words and story problems from their living rooms and kitchens. They were wonderful, all of them, but one stood out in particular. Her name was Rachel Shin. We all knew at once there was

something doubly special there. Her smile and warmth made it feel like she was standing in the room with us. Her lesson was asynchronous—prerecorded for students to watch later—but it was clearly designed to keep students active rather than passive as participants. She told her students to pause the video and complete a problem. She told them to email her another for homework that night. *Dissolve the Screen, Pause Points, Lagging Assessment*: these are all ideas you'll read about later, and each of them emerged, as everything here did, from the study of teachers like Rachel.

We posted a quick article on our blog about what we'd observed. It was the first of many, because after that first day we agreed to put everything on hold, to start watching videos together five days a week, to learn as much as we could as fast as we could and to share it out with teachers as often and directly as we could manage.

At this point, the last thing on our mind was a book. A few weeks later, we tentatively offered a webinar with video study and key teaching principles. It was free, but we limited the size so we could better model the interactivities we were talking about. Registration filled in minutes. This we took as a signal about the scope of the demand, not so much the quality of our supply. Even so, we redoubled our efforts. We just wanted to be able to share things of value and learn more in the process.

At the same time, we had another problem. We realized we would soon have to take everything we did in our training work and move it online. We'd been using Zoom for years to run our meetings and study sessions, and we had thought a lot about what a good online interaction should look like. Embarrassingly, we were nerd city about this and had written protocols and processes to help us make every online meeting as valuable and productive as possible. But

we were also Luddites. At first, most of us weren't sure what a Breakout Room was, let alone how to use it. There were screen sharing issues. *Wait, which button is it?* If that sounds like you at one point too, well, know that you're safe here.

In other words, while we were studying the transition into online learning, we were also transitioning our own teaching there in fits and starts. This turned out the be a blessing—we got immediate opportunities to apply the things we were seeing in classrooms. Some things proved better than others. We found some tricks that helped. And we also found that there were a lot of tricks that didn't work because they were too clever by half (i.e., they were fancy, but didn't actually make the class that much better) or too complex. Doing them demanded too much of our own working memory to manage—trying to unpack the key scene from the novel, peering into our laptops, and reading in the faces of our participants whether they were with us. We moved slowly but persistently forward, and decided it was more valuable to spend our time learning to do more basic things really, really well than to do flashy things that worked just okay.

Our heads were down, so to speak, focusing on those tasks, when suddenly we looked up and noticed that traffic to the Teach Like a Champion (TLAC) blog had multiplied. People suddenly started writing to ask us to speak at (virtual) conferences on online teaching. We tried to deflect because we knew we weren't experts—*Wow, people must really be at the bottom of the barrel*—but in retrospect, maybe that was the point. We were everyman—well, every teacher—struggling with this challenge, but with the blessing of a lot of video to watch and a room full of teaching nerds to dissect it. We might not be able to give you a theory on online learning, but we sure could cue up videos of amazing teachers to study together. Later, a friend in publishing

called and said, "You really need to think about a book. The new school year is coming up fast." First, we laughed. Then we cried. (We were really busy.) And then we got started.

For all our talk of being Luddites, of missing the classroom, and throwing slight shade at technology and online learning (it's out of our system now, promise), we really believe that we—all of us—can get a lot better at this pretty quickly. If nothing else, our own experiences both studying and using these ideas have shown us that, and we'll try to share some of those experiences of getting it wrong and then getting it right throughout the book, and we hope this helps to leave you feeling both motivated and optimistic. It can be done—so it must be done.

With all of that in mind, here's what's ahead.

[Chapter 1](), by Hannah Solomon and Beth Verrilli, describes a key distinction between two types of online classes, synchronous and asynchronous. We describe some of their strengths and limitations and how to address them. We also discuss how they can work in synergy—how a great lesson might include elements of both.

[Chapter 2](), by Jen Rugani and Kevin Grijalva, describes "Dissolving the Screen," which is to say, making students feel more connected, remotely. While building and sustaining relationships is an important part of Dissolving the Screen, it's about more than that. It's about doing those things through the content and the craft of teaching—about making students feel connected through learning.

[Chapter 3](), by Colleen Driggs and Jaimie Brillante, discusses one of the biggest challenges of online learning: distraction. Students are far from us, and they are on screens—a setting that is engineered to offer constant distraction. This chapter is really about how, in online

teaching, half of the distraction battle is often wiring your interactions to maximize attention.

[Chapter 4](), by Hilary Lewis and Brittany Hargrove, is about Pause Points—moments when you ask students to be engaged and active. We get practical and show video of responses to such questions as: How often should Pause Points for active student engagement occur? What kind of tasks are most valuable? How do I do them asynchronously?

[Chapter 5](), by Emily Badillo, Jen Rugani, and Hannah Solomon, is about assessment—or, as we like to call it, Checking for Understanding. Our students are far away. We cannot look over their shoulders at their notes or their problem sets. How and when do we attempt to Check for Understanding?

[Chapter 6](), by Darryl Williams and Dan Cotton, is about the foundational operating systems of any classroom: its procedures and routines—both student facing and teacher facing. The things we do most often are things we should have a right way to do. They are things we should be able to do simply, quickly, and without much thought, so we can focus on learning. This is as true online as off.

[Chapter 7](), by Rob Richard and John Costello, is about technology and platforms. How can we get as much teaching value as we can out of basic tools? What are some simple hacks to make our lives simpler when we're using technology? How far should we go? Simplicity is our motto.

One of the first things we noticed about Rachel Shin's lesson, that very first day, was how it echoed phrases and actions that recalled the familiar past she and her students had shared. We keep thinking that we can apply that idea in anticipation. That we should set out to plan what we do in our return to brick-and-mortar classrooms to align with