

Co-Teaching in Distance Learning

A middle school English and special education teacher share how they meet the needs of all of their students—and the new practices they'll bring back to the classroom.

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Online Learning

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Every student has needs, but they don't all have the same needs. In the English 7 classes we co-teach, for example, more than 60 percent of the students have identified special needs, and many of our students are English learners. And although our Title 1 school is able to provide an iPad for each student, given the level of poverty in the neighborhood we cannot assume that every student has internet connectivity. That's a lot of different needs, especially when you take into account that our classes have up to 38 students.

We already faced a variety of challenges, but when our classes went digital almost overnight, we experienced a new layer of difficulty. As we have all year, we brainstormed, researched, and tried many approaches, all in the spirit of letting no one fail. We found four successful strategies that have kept our co-taught students thriving.

1. Address Reading Access Needs

Many of our students are able to think and talk about grade-level ideas but are not yet able to read grade-level texts. We were able to address this in the classroom by forming small groups to read texts aloud, providing the class novel as an audiobook, and modeling fluent reading. With the shift to distance learning, however, we had to find ways to replace

the in-person supports.

One approach we've used has been to record ourselves reading all texts and provide that audio support embedded in all assignments. We are also providing leveled texts for each student's reading ability, made possible by article sources like Newsela. We're also taking advantage of our learning management system, as Google Classroom allows teachers to assign differentiated documents easily—we have students grouped in reading level bands, and we assign leveled texts or assignments that have been modified to suit each group.

2. Address Writing Needs

During in-person teaching, we were able to model both planning and writing techniques. We were able to give students real-time feedback on their writing in class, as well as provide visual supports like sentence frames and word banks.

We shifted our approach for distance learning to include more mentor texts than we used to use in the classroom, and screencasts of us modeling the writing techniques. Josh was already familiar with making screencasts, but Sarah had to learn on the fly. Students can access these videos at any time via hyperlinks in their assignments. We're also still able to provide sentence frames and word banks,

although the resources that used to be very accessible as visuals on our classroom walls are now digital, and students need to switch between apps to access them—they can watch a video on Google, but they complete their writing in a separate app called Notability.

To replace real-time feedback, we have been adding comments on their Google documents and providing scores using an electronic rubric. We've also live co-taught editing and revising via Google Meets, using a sample text that mirrored the most common mistakes we found in their writing.

3. Use Accommodations That Translate Easily to Distance Learning

When we were at school, students with special needs received accommodations related to their learning challenges that helped them access general education lessons. Some of these accommodations have translated easily to distance learning—extra time and modified work are two examples of that. But we've had to give up in-the-moment feedback about writing and the ability to clarify misunderstandings in real time as students now work asynchronously.

Other accommodations that are still easy to provide include opportunities to redo and resubmit work, as well as the

ability to use the speech-to-text supports that are available on student iPads and smartphones.

We were pleased to realize the power of using our own video lessons for all students, but especially for those who need multiple exposures to content or longer think time to process ideas. Now we plan to continue providing students with recorded lessons for home access when we return to our physical school.

4. Use Parallel Workload Management Strategies

The two of us share equally in grading and student support, just as we did in pre-Covid teaching. When it comes to planning, we split the work in line with our specialties: Josh is the content expert, ensuring that lessons are robust and aligned with Common Core State Standards, and Sarah is the access expert, providing accommodations and modifications to support student needs and adhere to individualized education programs.

During our daily office hours, students reach out to each of us through email—sometimes to Sarah, sometimes to Josh—and we know that we'll respond similarly since we're on the same page.

Distance learning is challenging for all students, but even

more so for students who need accommodations. Some days are really tough, for us and for our students. The bright side has been that many of our students who present the most challenges are not struggling as much as we might have predicted. Instead, many of them are advocating for themselves and finding a new level of self-awareness that they did not possess in the classroom.

The challenge of distance learning has shifted our perspectives as we have worked to devise new ways to meet students' needs, and these ways will transfer to in-person teaching when we go back to our classroom.