A Survival Guide for Distance Teaching

Practical advice on "fighting the tide of passivity"

Teaching in the Online Classroom: Surviving and Thriving in the New Normal
by Doug Lemov and the Teach Like a Champion Team

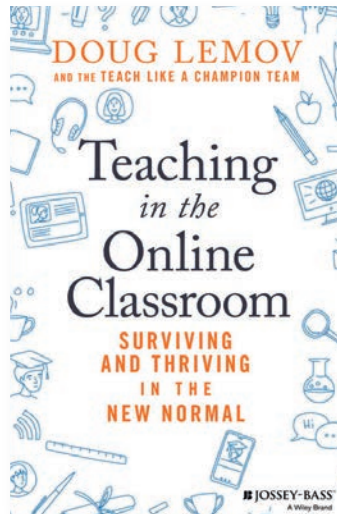*Jossey-Bass, 2020, $19.95; 192 pages.*

As reviewed by Kathleen Porter-Magee

IN THIS AGE of ever-increasing polarization, it wouldn't surprise me if *Teaching in the Online Classroom* gets ensnared in a debate about education reform or compared to the caricature critics paint of instruction in high-performing charter schools. But that diversion would miss so much of what the book has to offer and what its talented team of editors and authors have done from their perch at Teach Like a Champion to elevate the craft of teaching in this time of unprecedented disruption in our schools.

Teach Like a Champion is an initiative run by Doug Lemov and a team of educators who research, analyze, and share the practices of effective teachers. The project is affiliated with Uncommon Schools, a network of 54 charter schools in New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. *Teaching in the Online Classroom,* edited by Lemov, is a collection of essays on remote teaching by an array of his colleagues, who spent several months studying videos of effective teachers at work online.

Reflecting the Teach Like a Champion approach, the book opens with a highlight from the team's observation of a great teacher in action. Eric Snider is leading a remote English class for students at Achievement First Illuminar Mayoral Academy Middle School in Cranston, Rhode Island.

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.

"It's a great moment," Lemov and his colleague Erika Woolway explain in the introduction, "because it reminds us how important it is for people to feel seen." Before calling on a particular student, the teacher has taken care to acknowledge each one who has raised a hand.

This moment could easily stand as a metaphor for the book's mission and purpose. While there are nearly 200 pages of analysis, discussion, and explanation of techniques for driving student learning from afar, the heart and soul of this book is about how teachers can put the student at the center of the online classroom.

For example, in Chapter 2, "Dissolving the Screen," authors Jen Rugani and Kevin Grijalva explain, "it's not merely connecting to let kids know that we care about them (though hopefully there's plenty of that). It's establishing a connection through the work so that kids feel both accountable and connected at the same time."

At a time when distance teaching and learning has replaced the in-person experience for so many, *Teaching in the Online Classroom* takes the radical stand that we can still deliver a good education for our students if we focus on adapting best practices to this new world.

Indeed, as Lemov and Woolway explain in the introduction, the need to do so couldn't be clearer, particularly as academic progress came to a near standstill last spring in many schools that serve low- and middle-income students. The authors highlight the alarming data uncovered by John Friedman and his colleagues at Opportunity Insights related to student progress on the online math platform Zearn. After schools shut down, the pace of learning among students in middle- and lower-income districts was less than half what it was when the students were in school.

It's important to be realistic about what *Teaching in the Online Classroom* is and what it isn't. For starters, Lemov and Woolway explain that this is not a treatise on how we can use the current situation to "disrupt" education with technology. "We're no futurists," they explain in the introduction. "We won't be making any TED Talks on the seamless, frictionless, automatic teaching future waiting for us if we could just embrace technology."

On the contrary, they are clear that their goal is to make the best of a situation that they hope disappears as quickly as it arose. "We believe the experience of learning online will likely be less productive for most students than classrooms are," Lemov and Woolway explain. "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."

At the same time, this volume is decidedly not the Teach Like a Champion version of a distance-learning guidebook. In contrast to the best-selling *Teach Like a Champion,* which drew upon more than a decade of careful observations, *Teaching in the Online Classroom* was researched and written in just five months, to ensure it could be in teachers' hands for the 2020–21 school year. This is a different kind of book for this different era: scrappier, less polished, humbler, but no less useful. It is a survival guide full of practical tips and techniques for classroom teachers just trying to make it through this difficult year.

In each chapter, the contributors grapple with a different aspect of planning or instruction, with an eye not toward recreating the in-person classroom experience, but rather toward producing the same positive impacts that good in-person instruction can have on teacher-student and student-student relationships; student engagement in rigorous content; and student mastery of essential content and skills.

For example, the book focuses on the ways in which planning for remote instruction needs to shift. It's not just about livestreaming a lesson or cobbling together a sequence of Khan Academy videos, and hoping for the best.

Rather, in each chapter, the authors consider how to make small adjustments in planning and instruction that help minimize online distractions and maximize student engagement. Some of the techniques involve subtle shifts in the in-person tactics that great teachers use in classrooms every day. For instance, in Chapter 3, "Culture of Attention and Engagement," authors Colleen Driggs and Jaime Brillante discuss the importance of "workstation setup" and a "strong start" to every online lesson. "Successful online attentiveness in synchronous and asynchronous lessons," they explain, "is contingent upon students' ability to attend to, interact with, and engage in a singular

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task online. In a synchronous lesson, this looks like students equipped with materials for note-taking, looking actively at the screen, and prepared to answer questions."

Equally as important, Driggs and Brillante encourage teachers to "start warmly, brightly, and with humanity, but start *quickly.*" That's because, as Hilary Lewis and Brittany Hargrove explain in Chapter 4, "Pause Points," "if we don't engage people right away" in

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online lessons "participants grow more and more passive. After ten minutes, you get half the participation you would if you asked the first question in five minutes. After twenty, screen names start to pop up as cameras go off."

They go on to explain that "we are always fighting the tide of passivity, reminding students of how active online classes require them to be." That's why teachers need to use "pause points" strategically throughout the lesson to do four things: to build a culture of cognitive engagement, to allow for formative thinking, to check for understanding, and to provide an opportunity to consolidate learning into memory via retrieval practice.

This book was written by a team of people with deep reverence not just for

teaching, but for the relationships that are built between teachers and students, and with a deep respect for how important those relationships are to student learning and development. As a result, the techniques are focused on how a teacher can make the world of remote learning as much like the real world of teaching and learning as possible.

Any book produced on such an accelerated timeline will not be perfect, and that's certainly true of *Teaching in the Online Classroom.* The authors are aware of this. In fact, I thought they apologized too much for how quickly the book was written. A certain amount of humility is warranted, but I hope the authors' modesty does not lead teachers to take their recommendations any less seriously. Lemov and his team were among the few who were positioned to meet the challenge of crafting a book like this before the start of the new school year. No apologies needed.

Upon reading this book, many teachers might find themselves both more informed and more worried about what lies ahead. That's because the authors don't try to sugarcoat the problems inherent in remote learning or their wish that educators never had to face the huge job of scaling it up across the country. For those of us who believe in the transformative power of relationships to drive student learning, this "normal" is anything but comforting.

With *Teaching in the Online Classroom,* Lemov and team have laid out a framework to help educators keep their relationships strong and their expectations high in this school year, come what may. And in doing so, they have provided practical tips that will help teachers not just to survive but to thrive in 2020–21.

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