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ONLINE LEARNING:
Pandora's Box or Progress

By Casey Reason, Lisa Reason, and Crystal Guiler

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INTRODUCTION

Andy is the superintendent of a midsize school district in the Midwest. Talking to him earlier this month about the training needs of his staff regarding teaching online, he said, "This coronavirus forced us to teach everything online, and we weren't ready. And now we've opened Pandora's box, realizing three things. First, we have to be ready to teach this way again in the face of a similar challenge. Second, we aren't the least bit ready to do this, and third, our parents and students are going to demand more of this type of learning as a flexible option for challenges small and large in the future."

Andy's right. According to Greek mythology, however, opening a Pandora's box was a source of unexpected challenges or troubles. Rather than living with that expectation, after 25 years of teaching, training, and designing online and blended learning, we believe these challenging times have created an opportunity for progress that we have been anticipating for many years. Whether you believe in Pandora or progress, the purpose of this article is to help provide some sustaining insights about teaching online today.

COULD THIS BE THE NEW NORMAL?

Actually, yes. Many of you reading this article are probably aware of those programs out there that have delivered their learning opportunities in a fully online format for many years. You may have seen those programs as being strategic, if not quaint alternatives to traditional education. As we predicted in our most recent book, *Creating the Anywhere, Anytime Classroom: A Blueprint for Learning Online in Grades K–12* (2017), learning online is not simply an available alternative to old, traditional, brick-and-mortar learning models. This modality is now, more than ever, significantly embedded into everything we do in schools, including replacing old modalities entirely. Ready or not, this change has arrived and will become the new normal.

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OUR MOST COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT THE NEW NORMAL

Once again, with the goal of having you avoid the perilous pitfalls of Pandora's box, let's discuss some important facts about online learning so that you can instead make new levels of progress in the new normal of digital learning.

1 **Does online learning makes teaching easier?** No. Facilitating the learning process will always present a myriad of challenges and opportunities. If a vendor tries to sell a learning solution that takes the teacher out of the equation or all but eliminates judgments and interventions, we don't believe the learning experience maximizes what technology can do in supporting learning. Are there conveniences and opportunities to improve the way we deliver instruction? Of course. The work is still there, shifted perhaps, but still present.

2 **Does online learning allow teachers to avoid dealing with difficult students?** No, again. When students misbehave, it is always a symptom of either some emotional discontent or perhaps frustration within the learning process (Perle, 2016). Frustrated or off-task students make themselves known to us, face-to-face or through destructive behaviors supported unfortunately with their own technology. In fact, with simultaneous cyberbullying and the ability to use a variety of tools to aid in their assault, off-task students can perhaps be even more destructive in digital learning environments.

3 **Does online learning make grading easier?** Once again, not necessarily so. While the technology certainly gives us the capacity to capture and collate the data, we recognize that the true merits of assessment of student learning is achieved when teachers can make instructional decisions based on timely student data gathered (Verbert, Manouselis, Drachsler, & Duval, 2012). True, those access points are made easier in some instances online. But once again, it is the teacher and his or her dexterity in dealing with the learning challenges of the students that makes the biggest difference.

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4 **What control do I have over my curriculum when teaching online?** While we recognize that there are some very good digital products out there, we still see a distinct advantage to giving teachers working together some control in designing the curriculum they teach (Wright, 2014). Specifically, if the teacher is new to teaching online, there is a feeling in many cases that the content that may be previously loaded into the course shell or LMS is untouchable. We see this as a similar situation as to teachers in previous generations who received textbooks and felt that they had to utilize these books as the main focal point of instruction rather than using them as a periphery or a supplement. This is exactly how you need to think about your curriculum in a digital environment. Even if you have many teaching and learning elements already loaded in your classroom, never lose sight of the fact that as a teacher, you are in control and whenever possible, make the learning experiences your own, innovating and getting creative.

5 **How do I create inclusive and engaging conversations?** One of the distinct advantages to digital, threaded conversations is that there is a far greater opportunity to achieve equality. In that learning space, everyone can be heard, and we are judged by the quality of ideas rather than the tone of our voice, our height, our weight, or our visage. Take advantage of this by asking everyone to participate. We have found that in this type of learning space, otherwise-reluctant students can begin to blossom and share ideas that they might not otherwise be able to present (Vo & Morris, 2006; Williams, Jaramillo, & Pesko, 2015; Wu, Tseng, & Hwang, 2015).

6 **How do I address toxic behaviors in an online environment?** Just like turning your back on the class, if you don't pay attention to threaded conversations in the digital learning space, you may log in at some point and discover that some toxic discussions have emerged. If those discussions go unaddressed for extended periods of time, it can create negative and demoralizing impacts (Nandi, Hamilton, & Harland, 2012).

7 **How does 24/7 access to my classroom change the learning?** If possible, encourage every student to log in and work during a time when their brains are most effective (e.g., morning, afternoon, evening). Since participation can be spread out over a period of time, encourage students to think about an issue and then

perhaps reflect and respond at a timely point in the future (ideally within one to three days). Why is this helpful? Because the research on blended learning is clear that this opportunity to reflect helps bring out the very best thinking in all of us (Spector, 2013; Koutsabasis, Stavrakis, Spyrou, & Darzentas, 2011; Strang, 2011).

Progress over Pandora NOW!

With each of these suggestions comes a myriad of additional steps you can take that will support your growth. We hope you will look at our book *Creating the Anywhere, Anytime Classroom: A Blueprint for Learning Online in Grades K–12* for assistance. We also hope you enhance your own learning by actively seeking opportunities to learn within a digital learning space. Clearly, professional development in the decades to come will be driven by learning in this modality. As these opportunities are revealed, don't be seduced. Be a thoughtful consumer, and find those most scalable, most effective solutions—and fall in love with learning, letting the modality, digital or otherwise, make the moment. Choose progress over Pandora right now!

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY
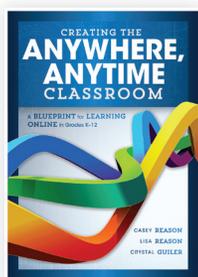
Discover how to enhance student learning in online and blended classrooms. This user-friendly resource offers direct guidance on the steps K–12 educators must take to facilitate online learning and maximize student growth using digital tools. Each chapter includes suggestions, tips, and examples tied to pedagogical practices associated with learning online, so you can confidently engage in the best practices with your students.
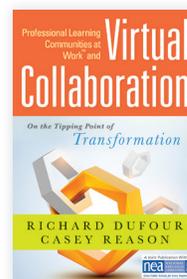
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Casey Reason

Dr. Casey Reason is the author of more than eight books and has won numerous awards, including Phi Delta Kappa Book of the Year, and finalist for IndieFABs Nonfiction Book of the Year Award. His first book was endorsed by the best-selling author of *The One-Minute Manager*, Dr. Ken Blanchard, and he coauthored a book in 2016 with Dr. Richard DuFour.

Dr. Reason has designed more than 100 digital graduate-level courses and training experiences and was recognized on Forbes.com in 2011 for winning a Blackboard International Course Designer of the Year Award. Dr. Reason also was the inaugural chair of leadership studies at Grand Canyon University, where he oversaw program growth from 50 learners to over 5,000 in a period of 48 months. As an urban high school principal, his school was formally recognized by the State of Ohio for dramatic turnaround improvement in student achievement. He is currently a trainer and advisor for the Ed Communities Network (NEA), an international digital collaborative with more than 15,000 educators working together to improve professional practice in the name of improving the lives of the students they serve.

Dr. Reason earned a PhD from Bowling Green State University.

Lisa Reason

Lisa Reason, PhD, has been teaching and designing digital graduate curricula for more than fifteen years. She successfully led the development of numerous online masters' and doctoral programs and is widely recognized as an expert in online learning.

Dr. Reason authored an article about cyberbullying that was featured in the peer-reviewed journal *The Qualitative Report*. She has also been a featured presenter at a number of scholarly and practitioner-based conferences and has chaired numerous dissertations and research initiatives on topics related to digital learning, instructional practice, leadership, and school reform. She has also created uniquely innovative digital training and induction solutions for educators new to the profession.

She was the recipient of a 2011 doctoral honorarium for distinguished faculty and outstanding instructional practice by Grand Canyon University and four separate awards and honorariums from Capella University for excellence in scholarship and significant contribution to online professional practice.

Dr. Reason earned her MEd in education administration from Bowling Green State University and her PhD in leadership for K–12 programs from Capella University.

Crystal Guiler

Crystal Guiler has been a leader in K–12 digital learning for over ten years. Her roles have included facilitator, coach, district administrator, curriculum specialist, lead curriculum developer, instructional designer, and virtual learning project manager. She has developed over 70 higher education and K–12 digital courses and has supervised the development of hundreds of additional digital training solutions.

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