



Nat:

Welcome back to another episode of Reach. Teach. Talk. This is a series of episodes with leaders in educational technology, and these episodes are geared toward helping everybody, teachers, even parents as well, and students to shift their paradigm in terms of the move that we're all making from brick-and-mortar classroom to remote or online learning, distance learning. And Brad Rathgeber is my guest here today, and he is the Head of School and founding Head of School of One Schoolhouse, which is an online school. It's been around for 10 years now. It's huge. And it's got a student population of secondary school students, and it also runs a whole slew of faculty-oriented and administrator-oriented seminars in classrooms, online courses.

Nat:

So this is a unique period of time. Right now, as I'm recording this, we have a lot of schools on the West Coast are gearing up for their two-week spring break. A lot of schools in the East Coast are gearing up for returning from their two-week spring break next Monday. So we've got teachers who've just dabbled in this and are just getting their sea legs and may have questions. And we've also got teachers who have no idea in their heart and in their conscious about what this is going to involve. And there will be some anxiety, natural anxiety, that they may be feeling. So today we're talking about building a synchronous curriculum and the idea of using, whether it's a platform like what we're using today, which is Zoom, or whether it's Google Hangouts, or whether it's just Skype or something. The platform matters less than the ability to connect live. And that's the synchronous platform. So Brad, thank you so much again for being with us today to help our teachers gain some confidence as they're making this move from brick and mortar to online distance learning.

Brad Rathgeber:

And thanks, Nat, for having me on today. It's great to be able to connect with you. And it's great to be able to connect with teachers from around the country. Just for a little bit of background, folks, we work with about 650 schools annually on our student program and our professional learning program. And over the last couple of weeks, we've worked with somewhere in the neighborhood of 300 to 400 independent schools around the world, dealing with some of these challenges that we have right now. So, that's some of the frame of reference point that I bring to this conversation. We do have, as Nat said, three overriding principles that we suggest everybody to just keep in mind as they're designing things that are appropriate for their schools, knowing that the solutions that I might be talking about today could be a little bit different for schools on a school-by-school basis because of things like their mission, ideally because of things like their mission, but also because of their school population that they're dealing with, the type of community that they have, where their students are. There are a whole bunch of variables at play, but I'll try to give some general overriding ideas.

Brad Rathgeber:

The first of the principles is just to be calm and pause. Remember that school is not the most important thing right now, safety is. And safety can look really differently in a lot of different communities. And so being aware of what's going on in your community. What your students might be experiencing is particularly important at this time. And students are looking to you, as faculty members, as that sense of calm in their life. You're providing them a routine that we know is important in a time of crisis. Psychologists will tell you that routines are incredibly important in times of crisis.

Brad Rathgeber:

The second thing is to make sure that you're being straightforward and clear. People have heightened anxiety at a time of process and cannot process information, particularly new information, as easily as they typically would be able to. So from an administrative level, this means thinking about solutions for your school that are as simple as possible without retraining everybody immediately at this time. And for the teachers, this means probably simplifying your curriculum down to its essence in a way that you might not during the fourth quarter, typically in your school. So thinking about, carefully, what is really important and essential in what I'm doing with my kids right now and what might not be.

Brad Rathgeber:

And then the third thing is to create simple solutions. We are emphasizing, perhaps even overemphasizing, to schools these days, that they want to simplify everything. Everything that you're doing at school, just simplify it, because it's going to be much easier to create and add some complexities back in later on than it will be to take away anything that you create now. Moreover, you don't have all the answers that you may want to all of the questions that you have, be they from health officials or regulators or states or other entities out there. And so you don't want to go ahead and recreate the wheel totally at school, but instead think about what your school is doing on a regular basis, and simplify that down again to its essence.

Nat:

Brad, what you were just saying about simplification. It got me thinking about something that I haven't thought of before, and that is about the timing of this situation. Because, I mean, I remember as a teacher, an administrator the idea of fourth quarter being, "This is the time that I've got to, I have to finish the curriculum. I have to complete this. I have to get this done before this set of final exams or the AP or whatnot." And the advice that you're giving is so prescient, because it's the idea of we need stability. And you have a great quote by the way on your webinar, where you say a couple of times, "Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good." Would you say that that is what really we need to keep in our forefront of our minds?

Brad Rathgeber:

I think there are a lot of independent school teachers, Nat, who absolutely need to keep that in the front of their minds, especially independent school teachers, all teachers just generally, because we're often perfectionist as teachers. We like to have things under control. We like to have the exact boxes that we are used to. We don't have that luxury anymore. And so really don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. If I can, I'll give you one example of that.

Brad Rathgeber:

We've been working with a lot of teachers about, who have been thinking about, "How am I going to video a lesson that I can give to my kids?" and we'll talk more about this, I think, in a second when we talk about the difference between distance learning and online learning. But for a second, play with me here on this one. Faculty members have been thinking about like, "How do I record a lesson?" And they've been getting frustrated when they've been trying to do it because they realize that it's really difficult to video record yourself and watch yourself on film for seven minutes delivering a mini lesson.

And they ended up recording and then rerecording and then rerecording and then rerecording and then rerecording. And it takes them three hours to create that first seven-minute lesson, because they're trying to be perfect.

Brad Rathgeber:

Moreover, guess what guys, there is probably that lesson out there from 25 or 30 or 2000 other educators. And so we're probably better off spending time on something like getting together video lessons for kids of curating content rather than creating content. It's the exact example of why we can't let perfect be the enemy of the good. In this case, in this moment, we are strongly suggesting to schools to move to distance learning, not online learning. So what's the difference there? In distance learning, you're taking the same pedagogical approach and finding its remote or online counterpart for delivering the lessons in the same way. So delivering your content and your work and your class in the same way. Online learning is very different. Online learning is what we do at One Schoolhouse for courses that we offer. In online learning, we have totally recreated our pedagogical approach to teaching and learning, thinking about time and space and tools and materials very differently.

Brad Rathgeber:

I will tell you that it takes six months to train a great independent school teacher, who already has a growth mindset approach and wants to move to that format, to be a great online teacher. Folks, we don't have six months. In many cases, we're doing this in two days. So we're suggesting to schools to move to distance learning where, again, you're just finding the remote equivalent. How this plays out then is that schools, we suggest, should be following basically a simplified version of their bell schedule on a daily basis so that they have math, instead of in room 123, in Ms. Smith's Zoom classroom. And they have English, instead of in room 101, in Mr. Smith's English classroom. Does that make sense?

Nat:

Absolutely.

Brad Rathgeber:

So in Mr. Smith's Zoom classroom. So you're moving to synchronous lessons that should be accessible to kids. This is, by the way, middle school, upper school, probably going down to fourth grade. You're moving to those synchronous lessons so the kids can also start to build that routine and have that face-to-face connection with their teachers and most importantly probably, from the teacher perspective, to make sure that they're building in social, emotional checkpoints with kids during each class that they have.

Brad Rathgeber:

We are strongly suggesting to teachers that, when they have an asynchronous class via a platform like Zoom or Hangouts or whatever it might be, that they're taking the first 10 minutes of the class just to check in with the kids or do something fun with them. Talk to them about something great that happened in the last week or play game with them or do something that kind of helps get that framework of joy into that classroom and that online space, and lets the kids, Nat, as you know so well and articulate so well in so many other forms, lets the kids know that the teacher really cares about them and cares about them as a person so that the learning can start to come through too.

Nat:

Are there ways that this format can help with communication between and connection between teachers and students in ways that actually might even transcend the brick-and-mortar classroom?

Brad Rathgeber:

Yeah, that's a good question. It depends on how teachers are using it. So this might get into 2.0 stuff. So if we're talking about how you've gotten this up and going, then you're starting to think about, "Well, what do I have the capability to do now that I didn't have the capability to do before?" And there are some of those things. And some of those might be bringing some of those asynchronous online teaching tools into our classrooms a bit more. So you might be thinking about discussion boards and other things like that in a way that you didn't necessarily do in your face-to-face classroom. Again, we see that as kind of 2.0, once you've gotten your feet wet and gotten into the classroom.

Brad Rathgeber:

Discussion boards, I'll just say, and Nat knows this too, are very good in particular for introverted students. It's a way to really engage an introvert in a way that is difficult to do in a live classroom. And so it's almost like the companion, to me, of Harkness discussion that you might have in a face-to-face classroom. Have the face-to-face Harkness discussion, and you can do that, of course, in these video type classrooms like we're talking about, but then also have some online discussion boards where you can engage introverts in a different way.

Nat:

And you mentioned in your webinar also about the importance of checking in with your students and seeing, "How's this going so far?" What's the value in that, Brad?

Brad Rathgeber:

Yeah. You want to be inviting feedback, both on the individual classroom level and then you want to encourage the administrators at your school to be inviting feedback from families, from students, et cetera, as time's going on, because you're going to want to think about this almost in two week increments. So, "I've gotten up and going, and I think that I'm doing the right thing, but I don't know exactly," in the tech world, they call this what the user experience is. I don't love that language, but I think it's kind of appropriate in this case actually. So, "What is the student experience like in this environment that I've created? What are the kids saying? How are some of the other teachers in my school doing things differently, and what are the kids picking up on that they really like in some of the all those other classes?"

Brad Rathgeber:

Just two open-ended questions every couple of weeks can be really helpful. "What's going well, what are you liking? And what do you wish was different?" It doesn't mean you're going to do all the things that the kids say, but they're going to value tremendously that you're listening to them and you're responding to them and that you're probably coming back to them and saying, "Hey, I heard this, this, and this. And these two things, we're doing, and these are great. And this is why we're doing these things. This third thing we can't do, and here's why for this." So it's a way to really engage kids a little bit differently than we tend to do in a face-to-face classroom. Although I'll tell you, I hope that that's one of the takeaways that folks have when they go back to face-to-face teaching hopefully this fall.

Nat:

Me too. And actually just this idea of checking in, Brad, makes me think about, you used a term earlier in the conversation about, which is growth mindset. And what a great example of collective and collaborative growth mindset here, because here's the teacher saying, "Are you with me so far?" Here's the teacher asking, "How's this going so far? We're in this, for many of us, we're in this new world together. And how's it going? Let's grow together. And I will respond," as you said, "I'll respond this way. I'll do this. Won't do this," whatever. But it's this idea that we're learning and we're on this voyage

together. In wrapping up, is there any advice you can give to teachers in terms of, they've been in the same classroom for two thirds of the year, assuming full-year courses, and they've had two thirds of the year to build relationships, connect with their students, to build trust, but all in the sense of creating a classroom ethos, is there any examples you can think of of teachers or schools where, they've used certain strategies that have enabled them to do this in a pretty deep way?

Brad Rathgeber:

Yeah. I think inviting that feedback is certainly key. Another lesson, and I probably should have mentioned this before. Nat, you mentioned some East Coast schools are just going back next week. And so if you're in a school that has not yet gone to this format, one of the things we suggest to do on the first day back in this new format is to reset ground rules and to invite kids into the process of what ground rules look like in your class given this new set of circumstances. So just those types of things you do on that first day of class, often we're kind of inviting kids in to create what the ground rules are for our discussions and to make sure that we're creating community as a class together, do that type of thing in the first class back and take the time to do that. That will be helpful for you as you go along. And then, again, maybe you revisit those ground rules after two weeks because you've realized that you need to change a few things.

Brad Rathgeber:

So it's almost like, "Oh, of course, I need to do that," but we aren't necessarily in that mode. It goes to just this though, be calm and pause. Just be straightforward and clear and create super, super simple solutions for kids in this environment, including doing things perhaps that you might not feel like you have to do again, but it can be good to just check in, and it gives the kids kind of a sense of calm and grounds them nicely.

Nat:

That's excellent. Don't let perfection be the enemy of the good. That's absolutely wonderful. And for the viewers out there, I'm going to make sure that there's a link up to the webinar that Brad and I are referring to through the One Schoolhouse website. And on that link also are visuals of a sample school schedule, what Brad was mentioning earlier about how you can make the school, the familiarity of the school day, how you can apply it to the world of this new world of learning. So all of that's going to be very, very helpful. Plus, they have an incredible section on their website that specifically is about articles and ways of handling and strategizing for school leaders and teachers during the COVID-19 situation.

Nat:

So Brad Rathgeber, thank you very, very much. From One Schoolhouse. Thank you so much for your time today with this podcast.

Brad Rathgeber:

My pleasure. Good luck, everybody.

Nat:

Thank you.