



Nat:

Welcome back to another episode of “Reach. Teach. Talk.” As you are aware, we've been focusing very much on the Building series, which is building a relational and remote classroom during these unprecedented times. We've spoken with leaders in remote education and technology in education. We've talked with psychologists and folks who are really keen on how to keep SCL strong in the remote classroom. We've talked to other educational experts and researchers, yet we really haven't talked much to the people who are the ones who are responsible for building the optimal classroom and the ones who are shouldering the weight of what it is, what it takes to pivot on a dime like they've been asked to do.

Nat:

That is clearly and obviously the teachers, the educators who are being asked and required to move what they've built over the past two-thirds to three quarters of the school year in their traditional brick and mortar classroom where they share space with their students to now this remote online learning format. Whether it's asynchronous or synchronous, whether it's checking in every day or checking in once a week, whether it's graded or ungraded or whether it's summative or formative assessments, whether it's public school or private school or charter school or parochial schools, all teachers across the country are feeling the immense responsibility of continuing their students' education and doing so in a way that maintains engagement, maintains a sense of tribal classroom identity of connection.

Nat:

This is no small feat and it's no wonder so many teachers I've talked with in the past month or so have said, "Look, I'm doing this and I am absolutely in this to win it until June and maybe even next fall if need be. But I've got to tell you, it's exhausting. This is a totally different way of teaching and this is something that is newer and more unique than I would have predicted." So without much further ado, I'm very excited because we have today a wonderful and talented and just very highly-respected teacher, Marc Rudajev who is here from Milken School in Los Angeles, Milken Community School.

Nat:

Marc is going to speak with us today about really very candidly, about the positives and some of the negatives that come with teaching in a remote schooling platform. In this conversation, we're going to touch upon the relational elements of teaching. We're going to touch upon how you maintain engagement and motivation. We're going to touch upon how as a teacher, you care for yourself and how you find balance while you have the expectations that are on you too, as I said in the beginning, to pivot from one classroom type to this new foreign classroom type. Marc is a math teacher primarily at the middle and high school level. He also teaches French and he's also teaches an elective and finance and entrepreneurial studies.

Nat:

Marc is therefore, a perfect teacher and he's also, ... by the way, I didn't mention it before, extremely well-respected in the way that he connects with the students and the impact that he has. I've seen parent testimonials about Marc and he's shared with me over the past few years and they are nothing

short of amazing in the sense that this is a teacher who really turned my son or my daughter on to math, for example, in a way that he or she hasn't before. Marc brings with him a background in finance, actually, and therefore he's a mid-career teacher, which will add, I think, a nice context to this conversation as well. So Marc, thank you so much for being with us today.

Marc Rudajev:

You're welcome. Thanks for having me on.

Nat:

Thrilled to have you. I guess my first question, really, for you is what's been the past month like for you? How much lead up time did you have to make in the transition to the remote classroom? Then, I know you've also been on a vacation. How has that factored into your gearing up for the spring?

Marc Rudajev:

As you mentioned in your intro, it was a pretty quick turnaround. The whole COVID episode, obviously, started really building up some steam in February. What happened was in the middle of March, when it really started to get a bit more noisy as it were, on a Wednesday of that week, we actually had a day where the students weren't in class. It was a teacher workshop day at school. So we had had a number of meetings both within our departments as well as throughout the school. At the end of that day, one of our last parting statements was from the head of the school and the administration team saying that, "Listen, we're not going to ask the students to come back to school on Thursday and Friday and therefore you'll have two days to prepare to transition and starting up that following Monday, just go ahead and we'll send you out a modified schedule and you'll be expected to teach online."

Marc Rudajev:

So basically, we had a very, very short amount of time to prepare. Then what happened was during those couple of days when the students weren't at school and we weren't at school either, we obviously had a lot of meetings, mainly virtually, obviously, with our departments and with other administrators. They sent out a modified schedule as they had promised. That Monday, we kicked it off, basically. Normally, we'd meet our classes four to five times a week depending on the class. In this case, we're probably meeting them three to four times a week. So it's slightly less than what we would normally meet them. The class times are also a bit shorter. But what we do have is office hours every single day, so we're expected to be online and the students, if they want to check in with us or if the parents want to check in, they are expected to be able to reach us during those times as well.

Nat:

Marc, thank you. That's a great overview because you've given me a lot to ask you as follow up questions here. First of all, what goes into the thoughts that the class periods would be shorter?

Marc Rudajev:

I think basically, the main thought was it's hard if the students are expected to be at school when we're physically there from 7:30 to 2:30, we can't expect the students to be online from 7:30 to 2:30 because that'll be a virtually impossible task to maintain their attention for that amount of time. Therefore, it's striking a balance of having them get enough education yet not zoning out and not just basically not being able to maintain attention for that amount of time.

Nat:

So it seems to make a lot of sense, right? Because when we're teaching in a brick and mortar classroom, we can have our students sitting for a longer period of time knowing that we can always give them a stretch break knowing they can always raise their hand and go to the bathroom, they can always ... you can do small group work, you can meet them up in pairs, just shake it up a bit. Where here, it's just like you and me right now, right? Like we're sitting down and we are at our desk and this can be, after a while, it could get a little ... my attention could wander.

Marc Rudajev:

Absolutely.

Nat:

Especially if I was 15, 13-years-old.

Marc Rudajev:

Yep. Yep. Yep. So I think it's actually worked well. Of course, we do lose a little bit of teaching time. But on the other hand, I think that, and I'm sure we'll touch upon this a bit later in terms of the techniques that a teacher can apply, we can actually maximize some of the time as well in terms of what they can do outside of the 30 to 50 minutes that we're online simultaneously using the technology that we have.

Nat:

Yeah. I would love to touch on that in the future. I'm curious though, because just to take a step back here, your school's operating in a synchronous platform, correct?

Marc Rudajev:

Yes. We're fortunate being at a private school where the students are expected to have a laptop, so it's a one-to-one type of school. So we don't have to face those issues of many of the public schools and less fortunate environments where they may not have technology or they may not even have the internet or wifi at home. So from that perspective, at least we didn't have to worry about those issues given that the school that I teach and, yeah.

Nat:

This is a real wake up call. So many issues come to the surface during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding education, you hit on one right there. The inequity, 25% of LASD students either don't have access to technology or they don't have access to a wi-fi hotspot. So it's one or the other, which means if you don't have one, you can't have this connection and this ability to learn remotely and you're obviously right. It's fortunate that your students, you could count on the fact that all your students had a one-to-one long before there were that this situation occurred, right?

Marc Rudajev:

Yeah, that's right. That would have changed the equation totally if we had to then figure that whole aspect out-

Nat:

You're not somebody who's been tech averse in your past. You're also somebody who's a very curious teacher, which I know is part of why you're such an amazing teacher, is that your curiosity inspires your

kids to be curious as well. So that's wonderful. What has it felt like Marc, for you? Is there any sort of surprises that hit you?

Marc Rudajev:

Once we got the students, the passcodes and the ability to log on, that actually went pretty smoothly and as long as we're sure to put some limits on what they can do and can't do. You might've heard that Zoom had a few security breaches and they're obviously addressing that. But even aside from those types of things, in terms of making sure that emojis and other funny videos and backgrounds, like I have one here that you can see, just making sure it's PG and school appropriate. So as long as we set up those boundaries early on, I think it's gone pretty well. Actually, the other one, the other side is with the teachers and administrators.

Marc Rudajev:

I find that given it's new for all of us coming from a traditional brick and mortar school to now online, I found that the amount of a collaboration, the amount of conversations that we've had within departments and across departments and my situation across even middle and high school has been increased multiple fold compared to what would normally happen in a normal day or week or a month at school. So I find that if another teacher has a great idea or something that works, they're very open to share with the rest of the faculty or vice versa.

Marc Rudajev:

If something they didn't work or issues that they faced, they're going to share and then someone can chime in with a solution or an alternative. So I think that that's been one of the big, big positives to come out of it is increased collaboration because we're always trying to collaborate and science and math should work together and the humanities and the English and in my case, we work at a Jewish school, so we try to incorporate a Jewish studies element to most things. The theory is, oh we can cross department collaboration but as we all know, we get stuck in and you do your math thing and you do your French thing and you do your English thing and then the amount of conversations that occur in August, September diminish tremendously. Whereas here, it's been a massive spike up and I think that's been a great positive throughout all the issues that might've occurred in the early days and weeks of our online teaching.

Nat:

What you're sharing is such a wonderful example of a surprise in a positive way about how the online remote teaching experience has been heightened for you. If I'm summing this up right, you feel more connected to your colleagues. You feel like the ideas are being shared more briskly because you're reminding me I always call it the class five rapids of the school day. Like we joke, you barely have time to go to the bathroom and much less collaborate or certainly not step into a teacher, your next door neighbor's classroom for 10 minutes. We want to, but we just don't have that time because the classroom is often described as a silo, right? I've used that term certainly in my teaching.

Nat:

Like you have this incredible epiphany, eureka moment and you just wish that there was another adult there to witness it and just say, "Wow, that was amazing." Not that having a number of 13-year-olds isn't great in its own way, but there are those times and here it's ... I love the fact that you're not feeling, I would assume, and I bet a lot of our listeners would assume that the silo effect has been compounded by this because like you said earlier you're in your home and we're not sharing the same space. But actually perhaps, if this can be ... and a takeaway from this could be for schools and for teachers

listening, maybe there are ways that you can really focus more on collaboration and not have that siloed feeling while you're working remotely.

Marc Rudajev:

Yeah, because we were all adapting. In some ways, it's interesting. If you've been teaching 25 years, 30 years, you're probably set in your ways. You've been doing the same thing. It's worked. Your successful teachers look up to you, students look up to you, parents look up to you. But now you're stuck in this new environment that's new to you. Ironically, again, just like I was saying earlier, the students are very good with technology.

Marc Rudajev:

That young teacher who's 25 or 30 who grew up with technology at a really young age, they might have tips and ideas and how to make sure that the students are engaged because they're much closer to that age than the 55, 60-year-old teacher who might be very good in person, but may not be quite as good remotely. So I don't know if Milken is an outlier, but I would hope not. Hopefully, you'll have similar discussions with other people you interview and hopefully they share the same experience because we've certainly seen an uptick in cross-collaboration, which, I think, is really good.

Nat:

Whether intentional or not, there was an implication of what you just shared, Marc, that maybe, that triggered that we are more, this word is I think overused in today's society, but it's all positive. We're more vulnerable. The Brene Brown in all of us reinforce our humility, our vulnerability is being exposed here. That example you gave is perfect because I'm a teacher who's been here for 35 years and I am rightfully lauded as a phenomenal Latin teacher and I teach Latin and that's my identity and I'm great at it.

Nat:

True. Yet I'm vulnerable because I haven't had to hit a laptop or to access Google Classroom or had to even share links. This is new to me and I have to rely on my colleagues. So breaking the shell of that kind of persona has been a positive corollary to this, this vulnerability of acceptance. Also, taking this a step further, we're all in this anxious, heightened, uncertain state right now, to be quite honest, state of mind, state of heart, right? So I don't know if there's anything more you want to share your shared already so much about this, but more directly this idea of how emotion and where we are today is factoring into how we relate to each other as colleagues.

Marc Rudajev:

Not only do we have to share amongst the colleagues, but I think the other side benefit is because we're talking to the students in their own homes and the parents often are quarantined or working from home because they can't go to their jobs. We actually have an increased, or I've found I've had an increased interaction with the parents over the last three weeks before spring break in terms of sometimes the student will be in the dad's office or the mom's home office and mom or dad pops in unintentionally because they need to pick up a book or a sheet of paper or some document and they'll say, "Hi, Mr Rudajev. How are you?"

Marc Rudajev:

You just that 30 second interaction of whether it's before class or after class or during class, it breaks it up and you have these informal meetings, as it were, that may not in and of himself probably don't do a whole lot, but they help that relationship that you were talking about in the intro. Then when there is an

issue, we've broken down that barrier because again, sometimes at school you might go months and months and months without ever interacting with the parents.

Nat:

We joke about the cat tail being seen going across the screen, right? Or the dog barking in the background or the baby crying in the background. But there's nothing like seeing a parent come in, like where is that file or you know, and "Oh. Hi, Mr. Rudajev." There is that informality and you're absolutely right. So I guess that's another question that leads into another question I had with you, which was how you build alliance with your colleagues, but we could add another branch and extension, which is how you build the alliance of these parents because I also, were well aware that it could also be kind of intimidating for a teacher to know that at any point her student's parent might walk in and observe her teaching and if there's a sense of insecurity with that. So what would you advise in terms of if you were to be able to have a role in establishing a formal parent dynamic in the remote teaching classroom, what would you say to the parents about how to respond when they come in and they observe a teaching session going on?

Marc Rudajev:

I think to get back directly to your question though, is the one benefit is this happened in March. If it was in August or September, beginning of the school year when we don't really have those relationships yet, it'd be a different story. But the fact that it all kicked off for us in March and we've already had six, eight months of historical relationships with parents. In some cases, I might have taught the older brother or the older sister a year or two or three prior, so you already had a bit of a relationship.

Marc Rudajev:

Anyways, it did help make it a bit easier, but it's incumbent on us to be professional almost as if you were in the classroom, but you're at home instead rather than just saying, "I'm going to be in my sweatpants and just take it super relaxed." You have to put a little bit of pressure on yourself just to say, "Listen, you've got to do a lot of the similar things. Communicate with the parents. If the student is struggling, whether it's via email or via phone," or now we've added this new dimension even via Zoom or via Google or whatever methodology you're using.

Nat:

Yeah, that's a great point you made also about communication and the enhanced communication channels you have should you wish to tap into a parent about a student or whatnot, it's easier with this technology. How about for students? Are there guidelines that you established, that your school has established that needed to be set when moving to the remote classroom?

Marc Rudajev:

I think that the key thing was in those first few days and weeks to try to establish those norms. If you have an agenda written up on the board normally in your classroom, well here, try to maybe have a slide or write it on a sheet of paper and then take a photo of it of today that we're expected to cover A B, C, and D are the homework assignments will be problems one through 15 or whatever it might be. So try to do as much as you would've done in a classroom, just do it remotely.

Marc Rudajev:

Again, in a math class, it's a bit easier because we tend to give homework every day and so the students are expected to complete it. Then normally at the beginning of the following class we would answer questions. "Oh hey, Mr. Rudajev, I didn't understand number seven, can we go over that one?" So those

types of things you try to maintain just like you would. Then the last thing is on the technology, as I touched upon earlier, make sure that they try to stay PG and inappropriate and don't have pictures in the background or don't show things on the screen that you wouldn't feel comfortable showing in class.

Nat:

Would you say, Marc, that you have as much or less than or more even more, perhaps, a sense of student focus in student engagement when you're running your class using this format?

Marc Rudajev:

In terms of keeping their attention, you just have to modify the lessons. Try to make it more punchy. Whereas, normally in a class I could tell a couple stories, go a bit off tangent. I'm there. They see me, I see them, I can judge their facial expressions. Are they yawning? Are they wandering here? I've got all this photos or screenshots lined up and it's not quite the same thing. So you just have to make it more punchy. Not only that, we're forced to because we have less class time anyways, but even if we had the same amount of time you can't expect to ramble on and talk as much and give all the side stories that you might be able to do in person. So just try to get to the point faster than not.

Nat:

Excellent. So I'm thinking, when I'm reflecting on our conversation this far, Marc, I'm thinking about how we've touched upon the connection, we've touched upon enhanced ways of communication. There's been some creativity that we've had to in order to make things punchier, as you just said, how to be creative and keep them engaged. There's a collaboration part that has to do with parents and them being more in kind of a focus than certainly as you mentioned correctly, that they are in the regular brick and mortar school. There's also been this sense of vulnerability and humility that comes with all of us having the tide having to rise all ships. We're all in this together. Then, of course, the outer broader landscape that we're all kind of anxiously and uncertainly living in right now. All of this, let's just pretend that it's all over in terms of the remote teaching requirement, what are some lessons that you think we have all learned through this experience that we can apply once we get back to quote, unquote normal life?

Marc Rudajev:

The one thing that I'll try to take away and probably implement whether we're in person or heaven forbid, but what if we were still remote come the new school year, is a hybrid type of model. So fortunately for math, a subject like algebra, algebra II, geometry, even pre-calc, calc, these are well-trodden paths. There's plenty of online resources, videos, materials that are available for those types of curriculum because they're very well established. Even French, French I, French II, French III, or AP class-

Nat:

It's cumulative. It builds upon itself. There's a tried and true kind of ... right?

Marc Rudajev:

Yeah, that's right, and not only that, is there's certain expectations that in order to go from algebra to geometry or geometry to algebra II, you need to have covered this, this, this, this. You need to have mastered these skills. To get from French I and French II, same story. You have to know these verbs, this vocab, et cetera, et cetera. So the great thing there is there's plenty of online resources that are already preexisting that one can use and sort of flip the classroom around.

Marc Rudajev:

So that's what I've been trying to do a bit more of is to try to find the online material. I try to come up with videos that I find applicable, push it to the students ahead of time, those that want to review it before the class period can. I don't make it mandatory at this point because we're not a flipped classroom school necessarily, but I've been given the freedom to do that and I'm testing it out and it's actually working quite well. So I'd like to do that and then in the future probably even create my own videos so I can really tailor it to how I'd like to teach. Obviously with this 48-hour turnaround, I didn't have time to do that, but I'm able to go online, spend an hour or two, try to find something that's appropriate and push it out to the students.

Marc Rudajev:

So I think that's something I'd like to take away and incorporate come the new school year and whether I have time over the summer to create my own content or whether I've got something laid out for the full year's content through stuff that's already been created, I think I'll use that. The benefit is then once we are in class, whether it's physically or remotely, I can spend a lot more time with the students going over the problems, going over the exercises or even you might even know this capability in Zoom, the breakout rooms. So we're able to basically split the students up. You choose how many students per room. It can be as low as two. It can be as many as a dozen, however many you want and you can assign them randomly.

Marc Rudajev:

Zoom can create them randomly or you can assign them according to these students are at this level, so we should put them in one room and these students are at another level, we can put them in another room and then you as a teacher can hop into the rooms. The students are talking amongst themselves, we're working through the problem or the group project or whatever you're doing and it really forces them to work together without having distractions of if you're in the classroom, you might have the four tables there with students then in other tables there with the other students. But as we know, 13, 14-year-old attentions can wander a bit and before you know it you thought you had created different groups but it tends something being back one big group. So those are some of the things that I like to take into the new school year, whether we're remote or whether we're back in person.

Nat:

Marc, those are excellent. Absolutely awesome takeaways that any teacher listening would hopefully be writing down right now and just nodding, at least nodding in agreement. It's wonderful having you here today on this episode, Marc. You're wonderful voice, and actually, this was a very ... it was more of a hope-filled and positive actually, reflection on how remote teaching has been for you. Thank you so much, Marc, for being with us today and for just beautifully sharing what it is to be in the footsteps and the shoes of a teacher who is making that move from brick and mortar to remote teaching and best to you during the rest of this spring of the school year.

Marc Rudajev:

Thanks a lot, Nat.

Speaker 1:

You've been listening to Reach, Teach, Talk with Nat Damon. If you'd like to recommend a guest for a future episode, you can send your suggestion or questions to nat@reachacademics.com.