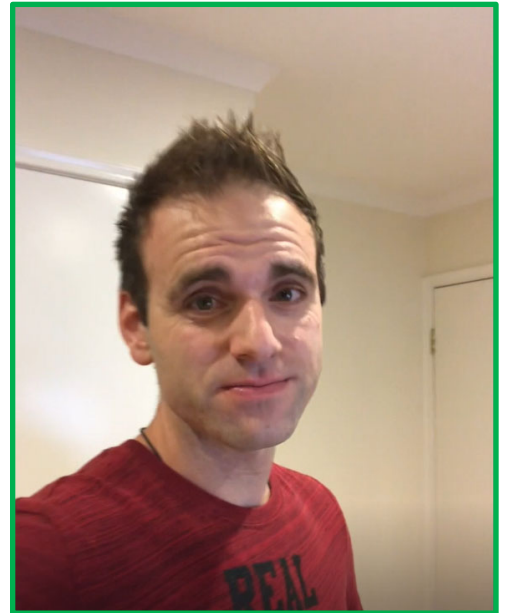


Michael Marshall - Life as a teacher during COVID 19

The latter part of Term 1 was a confusing and interesting time to be a teacher. There was a lot of uncertainty around and many unanswered questions. Every morning the alarm would go off at its regular time, but before too long, you would be hit with the overwhelming barrage of the COVID 19 train whenever you opened up your phone, flicked on the television, or glanced at the newspapers, but we teachers had a job to do. We would put on a brave face, head to school with a smile, and teach the curriculum to the students who remained in our classes. We would still inject some fun and enthusiasm in the school day while fielding questions and concerns from a slightly anxious group of students. Students who we have a natural instinct to teach, protect and guide.

It seemed that every day towards the end of Term 1, our classes would be getting smaller and smaller. Until, during the last week of term, Daniel Andrews officially announced that school holidays would be starting early for students in Victoria. The last day of Term 1 was by far the strangest day in my teaching career. While my class had dwindled from 24 kids to at least half of its original number, I felt the emotion rise up through me when I told the students that while I will be teaching them remotely in Term 2, I wasn't sure when I would see them again.

The rest of that week was an extremely busy one as teachers from around Victoria appeared to be working around the clock to set up for remote learning. The main issue being that this was an unprecedented situation. While we knew the topics and the areas that we would be teaching, it was hard to comprehend exactly how this was going to work.



As Term 2 drew closer and closer, I was confident that we had a solid plan for remote learning. I felt great reassurance and gained confidence from the leaders at my school that we were on the right track with our plan and that the students will continue to experience rich learning that was based on their needs. Even during a time of crisis such as this, I started to feel excited by what Term 2 might bring. The first day of Term 2 was a Pupil Free Day, and the entire school staff touched base via a video conference to connect with each other on a professional and personal level. That night, I remember looking over my notes and my plan and thinking to myself... 'Well, here we go then'.

The airtight plan that I originally set changed almost immediately. There were aspects of the schedule that needed to change and there were other facets that I didn't foresee at all. I expected students to be very keen to start their work, but what blew me away was their enthusiasm to send their work through almost immediately. The natural teacher in me had an urge to respond to every single piece of work instantly that I received from the students. After all, this is generally what we do in the classroom, so why should it change just because we are learning remotely? Secondly, if I didn't respond instantly, the students may not feel like they are able to continue their work. Worse still, they may lose motivation and become dispondent. After a few days, I realised that this way of reacting without a set plan was not sustainable.

As a team, we developed a plan of action over the next few days where we would portion our time out. Among other things, a portion of the day would be dedicated to giving feedback to students. Another portion would be planning for what we will teach, and some of the day would be dedicated to connecting live with students. I have learnt that communication with families and students is critical during this time. If you introduce a new concept or idea, it is crucial to keep the families and students up to date. I found videos to be the most effective and time efficient way to communicate. This way, the families and students don't have to read document after document and they feel a sense of connection. I have also made a point of making my morning videos to the students as entertaining and interactive as I possibly can! I feel that if I can find a way to get the students to log on in the morning, they will have more success in getting their work done.



In my morning videos, I attempt to alleviate some of the anxieties that the students may be feeling on a daily basis. I ensure that I cover the expectations and the work tasks that are scheduled during the day by including a step by step guide that students can follow and refer back to throughout the day. On top of that, I have introduced different characters into the videos, a range of (painfully unfunny) jokes, some riddles, and some ideas for outdoor activities. I have encouraged the families to send clips of their own children engaging in some creative activities and outdoor experiences, which I have

included in my morning video. Regular breaks are strongly encouraged throughout the day to ensure students can enjoy some quiet time either by themselves or with their families, and learn new skills around the house. In addition to this, our team has introduced a 'Virtual Recess' component of the day where students can interact with each other via a chat forum. This is a daily half hour session that is monitored by the teachers. It has been a great pleasure of mine personally to see the worries and anxieties that students had about remote learning, slowly turn into an exciting and enjoyable experience for them.

We are a week and a half into remote learning, but I feel that I have learnt a year's worth of lessons!

- **Some students and families like a set timetable, while others like to work to their own schedule.** This is a major adjustment that teachers are working with everyday.
- **Planning takes longer.** Not only are we planning like we regularly do, but we are also considering how the content and learning experiences can be effective in a remote learning environment.
- **Some students thrive, and some do not.** Every person is different, and while some students are making the most of their remote experience, the majority of students are missing the structure and routine of school.
- **If you don't take a set break at a set time, you will never leave your seat.** In the first few days of remote learning, I did not move from my computer. When I stepped outside of the house for the first time at 5:00pm, the afternoon light stung my eyes! I now make sure that I take a short walk during the morning, and a lunch break at 1:00pm.
- **Things won't be like this forever.** While this is a time of uncertainty and unpredictability, it will eventually end. The skills that students, families and teachers are gaining through this experience are

extremely valuable. It has provided everyone with a chance to reconnect with their family, learn some new technological skills, build greater responsibility and appreciate all the brilliance that an institution such as a school has to offer.

To say this experience has been a challenging one would be an understatement. Our ability to handle life's challenges is a measure of our strength of character. We will continue to refine our practice and consolidate our routines to make online learning as effective as possible, as we draw closer to that magical day when we are finally back in the classroom teaching these brilliant children again!