

Adapting to Disruption: A Growth Model for Teachers in the Age of COVID and AI-Assessing the Adaptation

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Abstract

The world wide COVID-19 pandemic required major life adjustments in just about every aspect of human activity. One major life area affected was the educational system. This article focuses on one specific school district's adaptation to the reality of the pandemic in terms of assessment of the performance of teachers. Specifically, the school district implemented what is known as the Growth Model for assessing teachers. In this article, the authors call for a recognition of the virtues of the Model and for the assessment of this novel approach to teacher evaluations.

Introduction

As we navigate the challenges and disruptions of the modern world, it is important for all of us to adapt and grow. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented changes worldwide to the way we live, work, and learn [1]. At the same time, technological advancements such as AI are transforming the landscape of many industries, including education [2,3]. In this article, we present an example of how one industry is adapting to these changes: the Growth Model for Teachers. This article focuses on the experience of the teachers and students in one specific school district (Santa Ana California), but applies to students worldwide [1]. The Santa Ana California School District had implemented what is known as the Growth Model for Teachers since 2018. This Model predates the impact of COVID-19 on the educational system, proved to be robust during the height of the pandemic, and its assessment is due and appropriate. In brief, the Growth Model puts the focus of evaluation of a teacher on the teacher's growth as an educator rather than on an arbitrary performance marker. This new approach to teacher evaluation focuses on professional growth and development, with an emphasis on individualized goal setting and progress monitoring. It allows teachers to continually adapt to the psychological needs of their classrooms and improve student performance without the stress and anxiety of being evaluated as an "ineffective educator" for attempting novel practices that might not appeal to traditional practice.

In the Santa Ana, California, USA school district, teachers observed a phenomenon that could be attributed to diminished attention spans of students. While it would be easy to blame this on the "Learning Loss" that occurred during the COVID year of online learning, the psychological experience of students was not unique and has been documented internationally. As teachers in that district, the two senior authors have personally observed this process and recognize that their students have been subjected to much more than just the challenges of remote learning. Their students, already facing challenges such as social isolation, anxiety, and stress, were further burdened by the fact that our school is a Title 1 school in an under-resourced community with a large immigrant population, making the students' struggles much more than just learning loss.

Adapting the educational system to COVID-19

In response to these challenges, the school district implemented the Growth Model for Teachers on a district-wide basis. This model provides a framework for ongoing communication and collaboration between teachers and their supervisors, helping them to adapt to changing circumstances and continue to deliver high-quality instruction to their students. So, whether you are an educator looking to improve your practice, a parent seeking to support your child's education, or simply someone interested in the future of learning, this model offers valuable insights and practical strategies for navigating this rapidly changing landscape. Understanding what has transpired requires a perspective that is broader than just the year plus of COVID accommodations. Take current high school seniors (in a 10th grade to 12th grade high school), for instance. These students had their freshman year of high school interrupted. Their next full year of education was spent online. Even though they were connected to Google Classroom and Zoom, they were disconnected from society and their educational experience. Last year, with the return to in-person school, they were reconnecting while under COVID protocols, which led to distancing, mask-wearing and perhaps most impactful in the Santa Ana School District, there was a mandated Grade Floor, which set the starting point for grades at 55% and carried with it the catchy title of "Compassionate Grading."

While this was the high school experience of this school district's senior class, every student in the District was subjected to this educational reality. The pandemic disrupted the education of students at all levels, and its impact will continue to be felt for years to come. These disruptions have had a profound impact on students' educational and social development, and it will take time for them to recover fully [1]. Whereas the safety protocols are over, and the grading floor is lifted, time did not stand still when our students' education and social development stagnated. Rather, the world beat on and in a meaningful sense is now a very different place [1]. It is a world full of conflict, misinformation, and advanced technology that not only captures all our personal data but can write our reports, essays, and make cogent arguments for us. That's right, Chat GPT and other forms of AI are crushing it against rubrics and even some licensing exams. As teachers envision the future, it is necessary to shift toward a more student-centered, individualized form of assessment that focuses on students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills rather than their ability to produce written work that meets certain criteria usually identified in classic-style rubrics [2,3].

The Santa Ana School District reformed its teacher evaluations to reflect the individualized needs of the participating teacher. The district and teachers' union, Santa Ana Educators' Association, worked together and designed a new model—a Growth Model—to help teachers continually adapt to the needs of their classrooms. By shifting the focus away from traditional observations and rubrics, this Growth Model was developed and implemented by the teachers, the teacher's union, and the school district and allows teachers to devise innovative goals to pursue throughout the school

year and engage in novel practices and strategies to meet those goals. Teachers participate in targeted meetings with their Assistant Principal to discuss progress and document evidence and data. The Growth Model approach allows teachers to adapt to the unique challenges of today, which are plenty, and the unique challenges of the future, of which there will likely be no shortage [1].

In schools across the Santa Ana school district, teachers are beginning to wrap up their 2022-2023 Growth Model academic year and reflect on their year of instructional practice. Therefore, it is timely to address this next step in the Growth Model approach. As teachers engage in their assessments, we suggest they engage in further serious inquiry and not simply settle for the traditional question of: did test scores go up? For example, what old techniques and strategies did they struggle with? What types of grading are no longer relevant? And when distractions are removed, what was truly effective? Collaboration with colleagues, seeking professional development, and asking for feedback from students can all help teachers to answer these questions. Simply looking at test scores tells us only what the scores are, but nothing about what was involved in achieving those scores and, therefore, how to refine the educational system [2,4]. In other words, we are advocating for a much more refined and sophisticated analysis than traditional methods.

As Social Science teachers specifically (among other academics we teach), the authors offer that we have been adapting to the disruption caused by modern technology for some time now. We all remember history classes that emphasized the memorization of names and dates. But cell phones and Google have shifted the focus of Social Science classes from 'what' and 'when' to 'why.' COVID was a major disruption to teaching, but it is not the only change to which we must adjust. AI programs like Chat GPT and paraphrasing generators are changing how we approach literacy [2,3]. So, as we all assess and reflect on our practice, consider what is different about the content, the courses, and even the effects on our personal lives. In our assessment we cannot be afraid to make changes [4]. Embrace them—our students are! As educators, it is our responsibility to not only learn from our students but also to provide leadership and guidance as we navigate this ever-changing landscape of education together.

Moving forward in a post-COVID world, it is important for teachers and the teaching profession to reflect on the adaptations that were made in response to the pandemic [1]. As educators, we must do the research to evaluate what worked, how, and why, as well as what did not work and why. This will allow us to continue improving our practices and better serve our students. At the same time, we must also consider current adaptations being made as we emerge from the pandemic and its impact on education. By engaging in this reflective process as well as engaging in the relevant novel science that is required to be applied to the assessment of educational practices, and asking provocative questions, we can continue growing and innovating as educators, ensuring that our students receive the best possible education in a rapidly changing world. As technological advancements such as AI continue to

transform the landscape of many industries, including education, it is crucial that we equip our students and ourselves with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in this rapidly evolving world [1,4,5].

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