

# Chapter 16

## Shifting Paradigms: From Screen-Free to Fully Digital During a Worldwide Pandemic

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On Friday, March 13, we said goodbye to our students at 2:35 pm, not knowing what the future might hold. I had a nagging feeling, so I asked my fifth- and sixth-graders to take their main lesson folders home, along with their colored pencils and script. I also made sure everyone had extra paper “just in case.” The students, trustful of me, took the request in stride and packed up their belongings without a second thought.

### In the Trenches

The buzz around the spread of COVID-19 had been growing, making it more difficult to keep the classroom environment calm and predictable. Two days earlier, a fourth-grader had come in late, sobbing and shaking because she was worried that her family would get sick. We teachers focused on keeping to our predictable rhythms, saying little about the future unless clarity was needed to reassure and calm.

As the talk of school closures began to swirl, our teachers faced a particularly unique challenge. The *Passage of the Vocational Skills Act* in 1963 had encouraged the teaching of computer programming in classrooms, and Waldorf schools (then wholly private) had made a deliberate decision to keep screen-based technology out of elementary school classrooms (K-8). Although the majority of schools in the United States have since been slowly integrating digital technology into their classes, our schools remain predominantly screen-free.

Waldorf schools and teachers alike believe strongly that children need to develop strong relationships with their teachers and the curriculum, actively and in person. In fact, our school recommends that children stay off screens (including phones) entirely until at least middle school. So, while other schools immediately began to discuss implementing “distance learning” using well-known technology, we were, for a moment, like a deer in the headlights. Before we could even think of online

delivery, a significant paradigm shift would be needed for us to face this global challenge.

As the day progressed that Friday, texts began to fly. Updates were coming from the Governor of California, the County department of education and friends in the district. Despite what we may have wanted to do, as a charter school, we were at the mercy of both the State of California and the County. By 2:35 pm, when I dismissed my students, nothing clear had been announced.

Then at 3 pm, the announcement came: Governor Newsom was closing all schools until March 27. He had signed the executive order and turned our world upside down. Texts multiplied. Not until after an emergency board meeting later that night would we know the plan.

## Stepping into the Void

As we struggled to find our footing as teachers, one of the biggest hurdles we faced was defining our purpose. How does one provide a holistic education virtually? All schools faced obstacles above and beyond the shift in paradigm: out-of-work parents, lack of Internet access, lack of computer or tablet access, parents working full-time (now from home), parents who didn't really know what to do with their children all day. Having never utilized technology for teaching, we asked, "What were the most important things our students needed to be successful in this new environment?" In this crisis, we would not be able to rely on what others had done for the past 100 years—follow best practices or use our sister schools as resources. We would have to create it all from scratch, fully dependent on the technology that we had previously shunned.

Coincidentally, in September 1919, as the first Waldorf School opened in Stuttgart, Germany, the world was in the grip of a pandemic nearly identical to the one we face today—the Spanish flu. We had opened our doors this year, 2019, during the movement's 100-year anniversary. In being forced to embrace the technology that we had adamantly denounced as distracting, detrimental, or even harmful for children, we have been forced into our own "experiential education." The questions we found ourselves asking were: What is Waldorf education? Is it found in the tools we have always counted on (the beeswax crayons, sheep's wool, the flutes, and main lesson books)? Can Waldorf education exist virtually? Clearly, the world has changed since Rudolf Steiner founded the first school in 1919. What role can and should technology take in our 21st-century Waldorf classrooms?

These are big questions. My conclusions will be based, foremost, by my own experience trying to teach fifth- and sixth-grade students through a screen for the past three months. But there are also the conversations that happened weekly among the teachers, both in our school and at the many Waldorf charter schools that now exist in the United States. We met weekly to share ideas, vent (maybe complain), offer support, and remind each other that we were tackling a hurdle requiring Herculean effort on everyone's part.

## How has it been?

The first couple of weeks of “distance learning” remain a bit of a blur—a fake it ‘til you make it mentality that was probably the experience of the majority of teachers across the country. I felt as if I was moving both at warp speed and in slow motion at the same time. Over the course of a weekend, as we struggled to navigate Google Classroom and Zoom, not much thought was given to how it would work. We were too busy trying to get emails uploaded and families connected. Following the Waldorf philosophy, many of our students had never been on a computer, much less get an email address. We set up Zoom conferences and tried to reimagine the rhythm of our days in a way that parents could support. Although understanding of the predicament, few families were interested in homeschooling their own children. We made decisions about whether and how much time different classes should spend on the computer, balanced by how busy the parents were, and whether they had any time to devote to teaching.

I found myself leaning into my computer screen during our lessons -“yelling,” my family tells me—as I tried to connect with my students. It was as if by talking loudly, I could transport myself through the screen and into their homes. As students became more adept with the technology, I became an expert blocker, making it impossible for the students to change their backgrounds during meetings, to lock screen-sharing to avoid the popup of Minecraft and limit the chat box for talking to me. I continually asked that they turn on their video, as I can’t teach to the face of a cat. I have had to become an instructor in virtual etiquette when I find myself looking up a student’s nose. Above all, I have had to change my thinking about what I can ask of them because they are, essentially, learning to teach themselves.

By all accounts, it has been exhausting, frustrating, disheartening and, unanimously, “not what we signed up for.” As we Zoom into the last week of the school year, I find myself refusing to think about September. The thought of more virtual learning in the fall makes my stomach turn because I, like my colleagues, know that this platform has not enabled me to provide engaging, deep and meaningful teaching.

## What have we learned?

This pandemic has proven to be a great natural experiment for Waldorf teachers. Unforced, we never would have signed up for such a thing. Yet, here we are neck-deep in the digital world. Did shifting to this new environment impact our teaching philosophy? Did we “sell our soul to the devil,” as some in our movement might say?

Surprisingly, I think the answer is no. Conversations with other teachers over the past months remain centered on the socio-emotional well-being of our students. This is, I believe, because Waldorf teachers view that their primary role as a teacher is to inspire, to plant a seed of possibility, to expose students to the person they can be. We see ourselves not as information and skill providers but as guides helping students imagine and seek their own destiny. Skills can be taught virtually, and

Google Classroom has set up a system that does that well. Nurturing an imagination for the future is a different paradigm; relationships, and not academics, remain the primary focus of our teaching.

But it is challenging. Relationship-building requires connection, and I find I cannot easily develop meaningful relationships with students if I cannot stand next to them, look them in the eye, whisper words of encouragement in their ears, rest a hand on their shoulder. Teachers in this space are no longer cheerleaders, encouraging the kids to dive deeper, reach higher, and connect creatively. It is too easy to miss a gesture that signaled someone was on the verge of giving up or the corner of a smile as a student has an “ah-ha” moment. The digital chasm is too wide. Students can too easily keep a distance, literally hide on screen and avoid being engaged.

Because maintaining relationships virtually requires so much effort, I often catch myself thinking, “What is easiest to get up online? What will be accessible to everyone? What can be completed with the least amount of stress for the parents?” and feel relegated to a teaching machine promoted by Skinner as the future of education in the 1950s.

Motivating was also tough. For years, I have relied on my own excitement and enthusiasm as a life-long learner to drive my students. That sounds dramatic. Many might think that a teacher in this position should simply raise the stakes, focus on the “high achievers” to inspire the other students to do better. But competitiveness isn’t what motivates most students. I am not a gatekeeper whose job is to identify and advance the “best” students. It is not why I teach.

However, having the students online did enable me to become more creative. It opened up possibilities that the students found fascinating. Instead of book reviews that were relegated to paper, craft or acting, they were now able to create a commercial, a YouTube video, or a slide show. During writing assignments done in a virtual setting, I could type synchronously with a student to show them exactly what I was talking about or where I wanted them to focus. We had a school movie night using Netflix that let the students feel like they were being social, even if they couldn’t be near each other. None of these used the technology to teach, but rather enhanced the teaching. Technology remained a tool.

## And into the Future

As Waldorf charter schools have grown nationwide, so have questions around the absence of digital technology. While many see its development as the next silver bullet that will finally fix education and restore America’s competitive edge, the justification for Waldorf schools not integrating technology is the belief that it is simply another tool—one that no doubt can be tremendously helpful in the right place and at the right time. Our concerns have always focused on this point. For example, one wouldn’t give a first-grader a power saw, but they can certainly learn to manage a handsaw.

Since the opening of the first charter schools in 1992, technology has often been at the crux of the dilemma a Waldorf school faces if they want to gain charter approval. During our hearing, we were asked to show how we were going to do what the public school was doing. We would not have gotten our charter if we had not agreed, starting in third grade, to teach the students how to use a computer, to type, to respond to questions asked on the state tests and to explain why we did not need to spend thousands of dollars on personal computers. This current experience does little to change my mind on this point.

If I separate the virtual teaching from the technology in reflecting on these past three months, I think it is clear that virtual teaching, for any teacher and most certainly for a Waldorf teacher, is not sustainable. However, our history of bad-mouthing technology ignores our own argument—technology is a tool. It is not bad or good. The question is, what is the best way to use this tool?

This summer's annual Waldorf public school conference title was to be Innovation Summit and the plan was to engage in serious discussion around what is needed to bring this growing network of schools into a new century of practice. How might schools look in the future, particularly in the area of technology? Many of us would have attended that conference with nothing more than assumptions about how technology could work in the classroom, many based on longstanding dogma and untruths. It would have led, I can imagine, to people making declarations about something with which they had little actual experience. Instead, we have been given the opportunity to experience learning in the same way we provide it to our students: experience, discuss, connect, and then evaluate. I am sure that this unexpected delay will result in teachers with a deeper understanding of technology and who are ready to actively discuss its benefits and pitfalls when we do reconvene.

The hope was for many, I believe, that this experiment would reveal the amazing possibilities of technology. It has been touted as the next great equalizer. Yet, I find that rather than make my life easier or the task more efficient (the purpose of a good tool), it only made it easier to do a poor job of teaching. I am now more quickly drawn to shift a large part of the responsibility for learning onto my students and their families. The expectations have been narrowed to facts and skills; it became not about deep understanding and connection but just getting through the week. I think this is why, as teachers, we collectively hold our breath, waiting for decisions to be made regarding school in the fall. Teaching is about much more than the facts and skills that technology can deliver. Teaching is about relationships, and in grade school, the connections that are linked to motivation, self-image, and mindset undoubtedly matter as much as, if not more than, the simple delivery of the curriculum.