



The Experience of Distance Learning Meeting the Challenge and Preparing for the Future

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Last spring, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, children across the globe were sent home to shelter in place. Our schools in North America, along with all the other public and independent schools worldwide, were asked to transform their in-person approach to educating our youth in order to meet the needs of our students at a distance. For many Waldorf schools, this was also a philosophical concern, as we have historically recommended that children, especially young children in the early childhood and lower grades (1-5), maintain a lifestyle as free from electronic exposure as possible. We strive instead to provide children with the opportunity to learn through direct experience, imbued with a soulful delivery and an artful sense of feeling. In addition, at the very core of Waldorf education is the ever-important element of human connection: the recognition that each student who stands before us is filled with tremendous beauty and wisdom, ready to learn from a loving authority, their teacher.

How, then, could we as Waldorf educators imagine teaching at a distance, using an eLearning management system? How would it work? Would our lessons be synchronistic or asynchronistic? What platforms would we use? How could we maintain a sense of warmth and cultivate a connection with our students and parent bodies without seeing them in person? Was it even possible to teach the Waldorf curriculum at a distance? These are just a few of the questions that Waldorf educators grappled with at the onset of the pandemic.

From my experience teaching in the lower school this past spring, and from teaching adult learners at Sunbridge Institute this past summer, I can affirm with a resounding 'Yes!' that eLearning management systems can serve as a successful way to connect, inspire, and teach Waldorf education to children and adults. My first choice would always be to teach in person, but we now know that online learning is possible and even a successful option for many students and families.

Distance Learning in the Lower School

When preparing for distance learning, I identified two main pedagogical goals: I wanted to cultivate warm connections with my students and inspire them to be interested in learning. In addition, my objective was to provide guidance and support for a healthy

social-emotional life for each student, while continuing to build upon the foundations of numeracy and literacy. Another important goal was to provide the inspiration needed to help each student connect with the natural world.

It was important to recognize that learning at school and learning at home are different experiences. Inspiring young children in the lower school towards self-education opportunities was a priority when planning for distance learning. More importantly, I realized that most children in the lower grades were going to need the guidance and support of a caregiver at home, in order to successfully navigate their way through this new experience in learning.

There are countless fun ways for children to learn on their own or with a family member. They can play math games, word games, and classic board games. They can help in the garden and cook in the kitchen. They can learn how to care for the environment of a home and yard. They can engage in handwork activities. They can color and paint. They can also create images with beeswax, clay, and mud. And they can dance and do yoga with their siblings and parents. Time in nature, building forts, fairy houses, and gnome homes are a magical way for young children to spend their days, and so is observing a living plant, then sketching it and writing a poem about it. Telling and hearing stories, then acting them out offers fun for the whole family. Woodworking activities and research projects are an excellent way to engage students of any age. The possibilities are actually endless. By reexamining our pedagogical approaches and maintaining an open mind to alternative possibilities, Waldorf teachers were offered an opportunity to find interesting and inspiring ways to educate children.

New concepts and practice lessons were taught by way of synchronous and asynchronous tools and communicated in learning management systems such as Google Classroom and Zoom. On many days, Main Lesson bookwork took a backseat, as I recognized that they did not have to be the primary focus when learning at a distance. It was more important to create meaningful experiences and artistic projects that children could engage in at home.

What Made This Successful?

First and foremost, it was important to work collaboratively with colleagues and administrative staff in order to cultivate an approach to distance learning that was unified. Once eLearning platforms were agreed upon, it was important to train the faculty on how to use them. Both my school and Sunbridge Institute chose to set up Google Classrooms for each grade and for each early childhood class and adult student cohort. Teachers could then post assignments and projects, complete with photographs, audio files, and videos of themselves teaching a lesson, telling a story, or leading an activity or project. These were considered asynchronistic lessons, because the teaching act and the learning did not take place at the same time. Asynchronistic lessons and activities are prepared in advance and posted, while students and adult learners have the freedom to engage with the work or experiences at a time that fit their personal schedule.

Synchronistic lessons, wherein the act of teaching and the learning take place at the same time, were also offered daily at my school, with live lessons through Zoom for all grades, though the duration of a Zoom class varied from lower to upper grades. Having the opportunity to check in with our classes each day was essential. Seeing the students and the students' ability to see their teacher made for a comforting, rhythmic learning experience each day. I personally found the daily live lessons to be an excellent experience for both me and my students. However, this didn't "just happen." The successful experience was a result of many elements that were put in place prior to meeting with the children, ensuring that our time together would be meaningful, imbued with beauty, and providing an inspiring opportunity to learn.

Meeting with the parents of the class virtually each week was essential for creating the live Zoom session experiences for the children. Providing the parents with an overview of the week, coordinating the delivery or pickup of all the necessary materials that the children would need, and outlining virtual learning behaviors and expectations was crucial. In some cases, children in the lower grades needed their parents to be present during the live Zoom session, but some children were perfectly capable of following along and engaging in the lesson on their own. They learned quickly how to navigate the mute button and understood how virtual learning worked.

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Making each synchronistic morning lesson fun, interesting, and engaging was essential to its success. Cultivating a sense of soul warmth through distance learning was not easy, but also not impossible. Prioritizing time to connect with each student at the start of each day, followed by the power of rhythm and routine, imbued with interesting content delivered through the magic of storytelling—all allowed each abbreviated morning lesson to flow. Engaging in an artistic activity together was rich and satisfying.

The most important element during distance learning was the time allotted for individual meetings. Each week, the teachers at my school took the time to meet individually with each of their students. Durations varied depending on the age of the student, but the overall experience and outcome was extremely positive. Students could use the time to ask clarifying questions about assignments or projects, and teachers could use the time to check in and connect on a deeper level with each student. At the end of the school year, individual meetings were an excellent way to assess learning, and thus end-of-year reports could be written with ample content, despite the fact that we had not seen our students in person, without technological mediation, for over three months.

What Were the Challenges?

Becoming familiar with eLearning management systems such as Google Classroom and Zoom, as well as understanding which lessons were better suited to synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences, certainly required time, trial and error. However, once the basic technological hurdles were out of the way, finding new and exciting ways of teaching, presenting, and engaging students became a daily creative challenge and an exciting opportunity to bring something fresh and different to my students.

In addition to each teacher having to navigate his or her own way through distance learning and eLearning management systems, it was important to understand which students and families needed technological support, such as access to WiFi service in their home. Some families were equipped with only one computer or tablet to be shared amongst siblings and even parents striving to work from home. In such cases, it was our task to make sure that each student and family who needed equipment was provided with the necessary tools for learning from a distance. Next came the challenge of

staggering morning lessons and coordinating special subject classes based on the students' and their families' technological availability. This did not make the task impossible, it was simply part of what needed to happen in order to meet all the students. As educators, we maintained the intention to remain connected with our students while inspiring them to want to continue learning. Creating a schedule that worked for the entire community was a challenge, but not an impossible task to coordinate.

Another challenge of teaching virtually, especially in the lower school, was to meet the needs of our students who struggled in the classroom with attention or learning differences and who now found it even more difficult to pay attention and stay on task when sitting alone, in front of a screen, in their homes. Without the physical presence of a teacher's guidance and the non-verbal cues so often used for redirecting and helping students to stay on task, some children simply could not maintain focus. In such cases, weekly individual meetings for students with learning differences was a successful way to help support their learning and keep them on track.

Preparing for the Next Round

When we first entered into distance learning, it was in response to an emergency situation. Parents did not sign up to be teachers at home and the teachers did not have adequate time to prepare their students for learning through a virtual device. Now, however, we know that teaching through learning management systems, whether it is through a synchronistic or asynchronistic approach, will definitely be a part of how we educate our youth in both the near and far future. Important lessons learned from this experience include the essentiality of daily live lessons and the great importance of individual meetings with each student. Future online teaching, I realized, would benefit from more projects that students could engage in over a period of time and own their own. It could also be strengthened by holding each student accountable for completing her or his work on a daily basis.

Presently, I am preparing both an indoor and outdoor classroom for my second graders who will be attending school in person. I put aside the beautiful baskets traditionally used for storing each student's personal items, and I replaced them with plastic shoe bins that can easily be washed and sanitized. Every bin will contain the essential elements needed for each student to learn and engage each day. Crayons, colored pencils,

scissors, a sharpener, a bean bag, a jump rope, a gem bag, beeswax, yarn, sensory toys, and hand sanitizer are some of the many items to be contained and utilized by each student, individually. This way, if we have to switch to distance learning, each student will simply take his or her bin home, having everything a student needs to engage in our work at home. On campus, students are now able to contain their own materials and carry them from our outdoor learning space into the woods, or next to the stream, and enjoy learning outside, in the fresh air, bathed in sunlight and surrounded by nature's beauty.

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Receiving the children with warmth and cultivating a safe environment in which they can learn is my number

one goal. How and what my students learn are certainly important factors, but not as important as making sure that I am guiding them towards being morally-guided citizens who are capable of imparting meaning to their lives and the lives of others. At school or at a distance, I think this is a shining moment for Waldorf education. If anyone can succeed at providing our students with an education, imbued with love, warmth, and creativity through eLearning management systems, it is our Waldorf teachers!

Karen Atkinson, M.Ed., a class teacher at the Waldorf School of Princeton, has been a Waldorf educator since 1995. In summer, she is a teaching instructor for Waldorf educators, leading courses and providing teachers with insights and inspiration for planning their year ahead. In addition, she has served as a mentor and consultant, for individuals and schools, for over two decades. She is currently serving her second term with the Leadership Council for the Association of Waldorf Schools in North America, representing the Waldorf schools and institutes throughout the Mid-Atlantic region.