

Some failing grades in remote learning

MARK PAVILONS

?People expect to be bored by eLearning ??let's show them it doesn't have to be like that! ? Cammy Bean

If only. Let's face it folks, we are grooming a whole new generation of e-learners. The pandemic has somewhat forced the government's hand and upped the remote learning game. The Province is on a new direction toward improved remote learning systems, to make Ontario more competitive and give our students a ?leg up.? Some studies have indicated that our education system is lacking, and that we're falling behind our world counterparts. Systems in other parts of the world have year-round schooling, and others include apprentice programs. Still other countries mandate a short military service when you turn 18. All these measures combined build strong bodies and strong minds. We've been knee-deep in the e-learning experiment for more than two full semesters now. By now, teachers, students and parents know the benefits, drawbacks and limitations. Most would agree it's nowhere near perfect. And I doubt many would say this is the ideal situation. While e-learning is a great tool, it's meant to complement classroom education, not replace it. I believe the current situation has actually placed a bit more stress on students and parents alike. For us 50-somethings, we graduated many moons ago. While we may be okay with new technology at work or at home, this form of learning is a tough nut to crack. My youngest daughter is in Grade 10, while my son is in his second semester of college. Both have much different curricula and both are experiencing challenges. Let's start with the most obvious ? technology. While we're lucky enough to have several Mac laptops at home, that doesn't mean we're all geniuses. And while we may be comfortable with one format, or one platform, we're not well versed in everything that's thrown at our kids. Before the start of the current school year, I never heard of, let alone used, Google Chrome, Blackboard, Canvas, Moodle, and maybe a dozen more. I'm not sure why teachers don't all use the same one. This means a student (parent) ?has to be tech savvy and be able to download and learn dozens of new platforms before even cracking open a book or PDF. That simple process aside, none of the schools and programs tend to take technical limitations, breakdowns, power outages and internet woes into consideration. This is simply ignoring the reality of what tools students have and their ability to use them. I don't even want to get into the basic math of affordability, and updating all of our kids' laptops. While dogs can no longer eat kids' homework, computer gremlins can lay waste to hours of work. Teachers themselves aren't all masters of technology, either. What does a student's proficiency in learning a new platform, or owning a modern computer, have anything to do with science or social studies? For this lack of consideration, I ?give all institutions an F. Human interaction is something that YouTube and a dozen or so different video chat rooms simply can't replicate. Cameras on or off? ?Microphones on or off? ?Asking questions by typing comments? Students have been reluctant to speak up in class since schools began. Doing it online is a whole other arena. My son really wanted to attend the campus of his college, to soak up the atmosphere, facilities and student interaction. He wanted the complete ?college experience.? The pandemic has denied him that opportunity. I realize colleges and universities are limited in their reach. But this lack of physical connection does have an impact on young, formative minds. The post-secondary environment always included the social aspect, as a way to foster maturity, personal growth and engagement. When I ?was in college, I always remained after class to ask questions or get into discussions with my fellow students and professors. Academic types likely don't even consider such ?frivolities? as important. For this missing piece to the education puzzle, everyone gets an F. Having witnessed, first-hand, the workload and teacher response to my kids, another huge failing exists. With virtual learning, there's a tendency for teachers to increase the assignments and lessen personal attention. This is the exact opposite of how teaching should be done. I can fully attest that workloads have increased noticeably, to the point where they exceed anything that would have been assigned in class. Group projects and presentations are also very difficult to do virtually. For dumping more on the shoulders of our kids, and offering less in terms of support, guidance and assistance, instructors get an F. According to Bernard Bull, ?in order to create an engaging learning experience, the role of instructor is optional, but the role of learner is essential.? I wonder how teachers feel about that one. Some may argue that as technology improves, teachers themselves could be replaced by muppets. Teachers and unions have asked for an extension of the current stay-at-home rules to mitigate any future outbreaks in schools. Gaps exist. I ?agree that perhaps a pause is needed, if only to bring everyone up to speed in terms of consistencies in online learning practices.? The key to success is to appreciate how people learn, understand the thought process that goes into instructional design, what works well, and a range of different ways of achieving goals, ? according to Tim Buff. We're all familiar with the term ?getting lost in the shuffle.?? What we don't need is any more students falling through the cracks, some of which have widened thanks to virtual learning deficiencies. Let's all work together to bring up those marks!

