

Agile Teams of Educators Keep Schools Open Online During Covid-19

E. A. Young¹ and M. H. Vianna^{2*}

¹Grand Canyon University, 85017; University of Phoenix, 85040, Arizona, USA.

²Rio Branco Institute, Brasília-DF, Brazil, 70070-600.

*Corresponding author's e-mail: marvianna75@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Two researchers share experiences of the repercussions within the education systems in two very different worlds: Brazil and the United States. The thread of similarity that ran through school systems within both countries was the evidenced ingenuity of teachers who quickly formed self-organized agile response teams. A demographic overview of both countries forms the underpinning issue facing teachers: they were on their own to develop a unique plan. Building from the general concept of agile response teams, to how the teachers formed their own approaches, to maintaining schools open will be shared by both researchers. The importance of maintaining an agile response team, that in the words of Cornell and Harvard scholars, “expect nothing but prepare for everything” will be highlighted.

Keywords: *Agile teams; individualized education plans; response teams.*

1. Introduction

In January 2020, the Covid-19 virus wreaked havoc in society. Everyone, except a handful of scientists in a biochemical lab in China, were taken by surprise. The silenced invasion of the virus spread rapidly in less than three months, placing unsuspecting government officials worldwide with unprecedented demands. The spread of Coronavirus was fast and furious as it landed in 213 nations resulting in a worldwide pandemic. Nations seeking guidance from the World Health Organization (WHO) found themselves lost in a conundrum of information [1]. The result was each nation, each business, each organization, and each educational institution found was left to develop strategies to protect their citizens and maintain systemic functionality.

Today, nearly one year later, when we reflect on how quickly government offices, businesses, public service facilities and educational institutions were shut down, we consider why and how some managed to function well, while others were diminished if not destroyed. The answer is at best twofold. The first and likely the most obvious factor for consideration is the leadership and financial strength of each nation or institution. The United States of America, as a strong leader of the free world, immediately built respirators and hospitals while providing masks and known

effective medications to its citizenry. Nations that asked for help were also assisted. Secondly, individual organizations and institutions made their own decisions on how to handle government-ordered shutdowns to slow the spread of the virus. Yet some institutions survived the closures, while others did not. The effective survival of an organization within a nation may be evidenced in how quickly agile response teams were formed to act upon these drastic changes in the diverse economies.

2. Agile Response Teams

In business, *agile teams* are reflected through carefully chosen workers who to purposefully compete in the world of ever-changing dynamics in highly competitive industries such as technology. The agile team is cross sectional, to ensure a foundational mindset for leaders and teams as they define, build, test and deliver with reliance on peer-to-peer accountability from diverse departments within the business [2]. The term *agile teams*, when applied to educational institutions, are not groups of individuals purposely put together, but rather teachers from diverse departments who come together with a shared value system. The agile teacher teams began with loosely defined directions to plan instruction, reshape curriculum to online platforms, and explore evolving solutions

together. Teachers and professors from diverse schools and backgrounds were connected by a clear goal; to reopen the classrooms. Whether students would return to an in-person structured classroom as before the pandemic or return to an online environment would depend on various external factors to ensure a safe learning environment.

For the purpose of this paper, *agile teams* in education are groups of self-organized individuals within an institution that together were able to quickly mobilize, assess, and apply solutions to best continue educating their students [3]. The more capable and better financed schools adapted easily in stark contrast to schools in small, rural neighborhoods. Yet the challenges each district faced shared threads of similarity: 1) teacher unpreparedness in the use of technology and, 2) whole neighborhoods with little to no Internet connectivity nor computer accessibility. Nevertheless, within each school, self-organized agile teams formed and approached the task of continuing to teach with the unrelenting gusto and determination of avid educators willing to advance the in-person classroom to an online enhanced classroom. Nothing was going to stop teachers from keeping their schools open.

3. Brazil and American Demographics

To begin the discussion of preparations for distance learning, the demographics of a cross section of schools in the USA and Brazil will be presented. The purpose for this section on demographics is to illustrate how impossible it would have been for teachers across Brazil and America to find one comfortable way to accomplish the task at hand. The vast expanse of territory and diversity of each school location gave rise to each school developing their own agile team approach.

The sudden mandate by government leaders to close schools in mid-March 2020 [4], put classroom teachers in a turmoil for weeks, while they self-organized in teams to perform a needs assessment of their communities and action plans. The top priority was to continue educating their students while keeping students, families, and educational faculty and staff safe from the pandemic. What happened for educators within the Federal District of Brasilia extended beyond a central plan for private and for public school institutions. Each school responded according to the local governor's plan of action and stakeholders of each school maneuvered through unchartered territory to embrace agile mindsets [3].

Similar to the mandate in Brazil, the governors of each state in the US ruled that schools would be closed but that learning must continue. Governors gave no further directions. According to the United States

Geographic Survey (2019) [5] each state had a varying number of counties from 3 counties in Delaware and 254 in Texas. Each county required that the school district within their county develop plans on how to educate their own students. Unlike Brasilia, a county in the U.S. is described as the geographical boundaries within which were 13,506 school districts often spanning territories inclusive of cities to suburbs to rural farmlands serving over 130,930 kindergarten to high schools [6]. One can quickly see that the very expanse of territory each serving very different populations with vast differences in finances and resources at their disposal, teachers in both countries were truly on their own to develop a plan that met the needs of their families and students.

4. Teachers in Action

In March 2020, it was incumbent upon the 6.5 million teachers from Brazil and the United States to assess their students' needs and continue their education, but without the construct of brick and mortar buildings, books, paper, and pencils. Instead 3.2 million public school teachers in the United States [6] and the 3.3 million public school teachers in Brazil [4] embarked on a new journey into the strange new world of cyberspace "classroom" education.

To begin their journey, teachers needed to have technology skills, computers, cell phones, tablets, manila envelopes for paper instructions, lessons, worksheets, and plenty of energy to work long hours planning in self-organized agile work teams. Strengths of each of the team members were quickly identified and matched to the needs of the district. Some converted lessons for each subject into an online format. Some located supplemental, yet safe, websites to enhance lessons. Those who self-identified as having inadequate technology skills, created the at-home materials to complement online classes. They made copies of workbook pages and classroom books to be delivered by foot to students' homes or monitored distribution sites where parents could pick up the manila envelopes. Some developed timelines and directions for the students to follow. Others trained parents and students how to access the school cyber classroom. Still others developed calling lists of students and families to personally make contact with the children and guide the parents in understanding attendance, assignments, and grading. While this all sounded like a lot to do in a short time, let's examine how teachers in rural areas and spread out farmlands managed.

Many districts were economically disadvantaged, and the children did not own computers. Many had no Internet service. For these schools, districts had to also supply computers to each student, equip school buses

with Internet hot spots and locate them strategically throughout the neighborhoods to provide Internet service to each home. Some schools were too economically disadvantaged to supply their families with the resources needed for online distance learning. Yet teachers did not give up. They used telephones and facetime when available to talk to their students; but to support all their students in finding alternate means of learning was not only difficult; but impossible for hundreds of thousands of students. Another huge challenge faced special needs teachers. How could specialized Individual Instructional Plans (IEPs) for each of their students be met?

The challenges were not over yet. The end of the 2019-2020 school year in June, in the United States, brought new challenges for the teachers. Authentic assessment of achievement and promotion to the next grade in the wake of parental pressure was yet a new force that teachers had to face. Agile teams relied on supervisors and administrators to guide them with spotty attendance issues and course competency measures. Sports were eliminated, yet many junior and senior athletes had relied on scouts watching them play in hopes of recruitment for college scholarships. Seniors worried that universities would view Advanced Placement (AP) courses as diluted by online instruction resulting in college acceptance and scholarship disparities. The repercussions of missing 2-3 months of classroom learning began to unravel when schools closed for summer break (June-August); however, the new school year was about to begin. The repercussions of school closures and attempts toward online instruction for students of all social strata continues to unravel as families have exhausted the stay-at-home learning and shared workspace.

5. Summer Ended and Fall Began

With teachers' heads still swirling from the ending of the 2019-2020 school year, self-organized agile teacher teams had little time to reflect, ponder, and assess the positive and negative aspects of the teams' first response to an unforeseen crisis. As they pondered, it was time to reflect on the Socratic metaphor "expect nothing, but be prepared for everything" [7]. The metaphor suggests that being attentive to everything that is important within the context of a situation without allowing expectations to narrow one's focus. According to Prieto [3], agile learning squads should focus daily reflections on understanding accomplishments already achieved in the present time while having an eye opened, but not focused on the future. Not knowing what to expect, leaders worldwide have allowed mayors and community leaders to decide how to begin the new year. Some students will begin in the classroom with the mandate that students and

teachers wear masks. Some are beginning with classrooms located outdoors. While others are taking a more cautious approach, beginning with classes online for a short period of time as they assess the new circumstances. Others are developing a hybrid plan combining in-person and online instruction [8].

6. Teacher Reflections

How were reflections conducted to enable educators to remain abreast families' and students' current needs to maintain momentum in the learning process of 2020? Teachers quickly created learning groups via educational platforms and popular communication applications to drive ideas and embrace peer-to-peer accountability [2]. Students and teachers aptly connected through the free application WhatsApp. Groups were created among grade levels to ensure students and teachers stayed connected around the clock. Regular hours for instruction and communication of assignments and projects were no longer time-bound to classroom instruction and asynchronous email communications. Students and teachers communicated about projects and shared ideas to ensure integration of evolving curricula developed in compliance to a shared community of learners.

Lencioni [2] affirmed a foundational block of agile teams is creating trust across the diverse departmental sections of teams. Any lack of trust among the stakeholders, who share a valued system of organizational patterns, could jeopardize the integration of programs across subject areas. The favorable timeframe of quick communications among parent groups and student-teacher groups on WhatsApp also led to an increased level of trust among peers, parents, administrators and educators [9].

Stakeholders no longer had to wait until the next scheduled class meeting or parent conference to share concerns. Students could clear up inquiries nearly immediately through real-time communication applications. The practicality of the free WhatsApp application extended beyond university and private school students to stakeholders and students in rural schools, facilitating and strengthening the connections among families, students, principals, and teachers [10]. Solutions to effectively reach students from diverse social strata were addressed more quickly with families at home, facing the reality of shared workspace.

Currently educators in the public and private sectors are seeking to advance to the next step in learning in 2021; triweekly re-evaluations are in motion of the number of people who have become ill with Covid-19 and of those who have succumbed to the illness. When

the numbers of deaths and illness plateau, educators within the Federal District of Brasilia will migrate to the hybrid model of learning. Under the hybrid model, students will be divided weekly according to a rotating schedule of grade level and learning format: online and in-person. Educators will revisit the data of Covid-19 illnesses every three weeks to reach a decision of how to proceed with the evolving curricular planning for students to continue learning in the safest, healthiest environment [8]. Students and families continue to receive weekly surveys from educators to monitor how they feel that their child is benefitting from online learning during the shared work/study environment at home, and how solutions to unstable WiFi signal or a lack of computer technology at home can be solved. The Federal University of the State of Goiás (UFG) has invested in the online learning curriculum by offering a reduced Internet plan to enrolled students and providing laptops to students who lack resources. University leaders continue to reevaluate in-person class schedule options, which have been on hold since mid-March, as safety guidelines shift and Covid-19 cases continue to affect the population [11].

At Grand Canyon University (GRU), residencies have been tailored to ensure students and faculty are safe and adhere to the local health guidelines during Covid-19. GCU residencies are safe environments where students network with faculty experts and other students to acquire in-depth content knowledge while they write their dissertation. Programs and opportunities differ, providing specific tools and resources to understand their area of study and expertise [12]. GCU faculty continue a high standard of rigor and hands-on activities required to challenge students' knowledge during residencies, realigned to the everchanging health guidelines due to Covid-19 illnesses and deaths. To participate in the last residency of 2020 (December 14-18), students had to agree to a temperature check upon arrival, ensure that they had experienced no symptoms within the last 24 hours, and wear a mask and a face shield at all times. Professors were encouraged to allow extended deadlines for students that required more time with completing assignments and residency projects until Saturday at midnight [13].

Once students cleared protocol, students found their assigned base camp at the off-campus location in Phoenix, Arizona. The base camp for residency was an assigned room number, where hand sanitizer, disinfectant and paper towels were available at every table. Before Covid-19, students shared the same base

camp. Now students were dispersed throughout the building to ensure social distancing measures of at least 6 feet and room capacity numbers were adhered to for indoor capacity. Cameras had been installed in every room so the guest speaker could be seen and heard by students throughout the different classrooms. For the nursing department, no standardized patients were used this residency. Patients in the past re-enacted real-life scenarios with dolls that mimicked real health problems [13]. GCU continues to offer residencies so students remain abreast the curriculum during these unchartered times. With few prospective changes in social distancing measures for the 2021 semester, the 5-day ground residencies, with 3 weeks of online work, keep professors and students connected until they resume in-person instruction.

7. Conclusion

Teachers and students in Brazil and the USA have found common ground within their agile teams of peer-to-peer mindsets by learning to navigate the unknowns facing our current educational system. Agile teams of teachers must move rapidly and efficiently to prepare weekly lessons, transforming the curricula to online instruction through diverse platforms and inconsistent scheduling paradigms. Meetings with parents and students through teleconferences via Zoom, WhatsApp, and Google Meet continue to extend beyond brick and mortar hours of a regular school day. The enhanced communication mode connects learners of diverse social strata worldwide. Education remains at the forefront, keeping agile teams preparing for unexpected challenges. Meanwhile, teachers, parents, and students continue onward in this new normal of masking up, social distancing, hand washing, sanitizing pens and pencils, computers and other learning devices with expectations of a return to in-person classes within an uncertain timeline.

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