In the Spotlight—Social Thinking® in the World of Online Learning with More Literal-Minded Social Learners
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 Last spring, we were all thrust into a new world of learning and teaching. As I moved my classes to online learning, suddenly my students were highlighted in a whole new way. We went from being a part of a group, to multiple individuals and talking heads on the same screen, together but apart. In the introductory scene of the 1970s TV sitcom, The Brady Bunch, the characters interact with each other in expected ways from the individual squares on the screen. My students? Not so much. It quickly became apparent that remote learning came with an entirely new set of hidden social rules to figure out and navigate.

When I work with social learners who are more literal-minded and have weaker social self-awareness in the school building, we work on reading the social cues around us. I try to help students fit in and fly under the radar, especially in middle school and high school. We spend a lot of time talking about how to behave in the classroom, hallway, lunchroom so as not to draw any extra attention to themselves, either positively or negatively. We practice taking conversational turns, using eye gaze, smiling and greeting at the right times, sitting quietly at the right times, paying attention (or at least pretending to pay attention) during instruction—all of the nuances of classroom survival. In that setting, students are one of many, and there are times when they can escape the eyes of their teachers and peers.

The online learning spotlight and scrutiny is exhausting—for everyone!
Then came online learning. Literally overnight, the social landscape changed. Suddenly the cameras were on our faces every moment of every lesson. As a neurotypical social thinker even I was distracted by how I looked, how I sounded, and how the camera caught my every move. Every. Single. Move. Instead of listening to others, I found myself watching my face, overthinking the shine on my forehead, wondering whether my mouth was oddly shaped, and thinking, "Wow, I definitely need lipstick if I am going to keep this up…"

I also saw my living room through new eyes. I found myself setting up a picturesque but uncluttered backdrop like it was a set, arranging the computer so the messy part of the room was hidden, and making sure my husband or pets wouldn't inadvertently walk through the picture while I was "on." Even while I was teaching, my mind was engaging in mental gymnastics, taking note of what was happening on the screen while simultaneously tuning into whatever happened to be going on in my home at that given moment. And the mental effort it took to translate all of my best teaching strategies and lessons to a screen was a constant, never-ending puzzle to solve in real time. 40 minutes on Zoom felt like hours in the classroom. Mental exhaustion was the norm.

In the same way, my less socially aware students were going through similar cerebral exercises. For some it was like handing a mirror to a toddler—they loved to watch themselves on the camera and make faces, unaware that we could all see every silly pose. For others, the look into everyone else's living room was a chance to compare the haves to the have-nots, to make editorial comments, or to loudly comment on the cat walking across the room during the middle of a math lecture. The cat was so much more exciting than absolute value of a complex number! The camera not only captured but magnified every repetitive gesture, every awkward movement, and every unexpected comment.

Adapting teaching practices to meet our students' online social learning needs
For students who struggle with making spontaneous abstract social interpretations, distance learning may mean that we need to adjust our lesson plans a bit. It gives us a unique opportunity to help these students view both social interactions and their own behaviour through a tighter lens. At the same time, we need to treat this new learning environment and opportunity with a gentle heart and compassion. It can come with big feelings for everyone involved—the student, teachers, classmates, and even parents who suddenly have an unofficial seat in the classroom.

Before starting any lesson, we need to consider the social learner and the "why" behind every lesson. It is extremely important that we approach these lessons (and all lessons!) with empathy and positive intent. The goal isn't to correct behaviour or fit the student into a mould to make it easier on the teacher or peers, or even more comfortable for the parent. We should never create a situation where the student is shamed or embarrassed. Instead, the intent is always for students to grow in their own understanding and develop metacognitive strategies to self-monitor and present themselves in a manner they would like. Only then will the lesson be meaningful and edifying. So, how might we tackle that?

Helping our social learners and all interventionists adapt to the online classroom: a strategy

First, help students identify the changes in the learning environment. Although this may seem obvious, many of our students don't realize that the rules have changed. Spend some time brainstorming what is different and why, helping students pay attention and tune in to some of the changes. I found that screenshots of the student, both on and off task, presented privately via a Google Doc was a helpful visual* (see note at the end of this article). Initially, we started by identifying what we could see:

> *Good social thinking looks pretty much the same on the computer screen as it does in real life, except, it's magnified. Because the camera is looking at you ALL THE TIME, it is easy to tell when your mind is distracted. Both teachers and students can see you and they can tell when you are distracted. Look at each of the pictures below and decide if they are showing good social thinking.*

We followed up with a second lesson that included thinking about others, or interpretation:

> *Good social thinking looks pretty much the same on the computer screen as it does in real life, except it's magnified. Because the camera is looking at you ALL THE TIME, it is easy for people to see you and have thoughts about you. People have thoughts about each other all the time. Our job is to make sure they have comfortable thoughts about us, not uncomfortable. Reconsider the pictures below and try to guess if the people looking at you are having comfortable or uncomfortable thoughts about your behaviour. (See note at the end of this article.)*

We continued to layer the lessons to explore remote learning through the Social Thinking®—Social Competency Model, starting with Social Attention and moving through Social Interpretation and Problem Solving. These weren't novel concepts to my students, but the situation and environment were new. As we moved through our lessons, students became more aware that, just like real life, their behaviour online created multiple social emotional chain reactions with teachers, classmates, and even parents. Eventually, students were able to adjust their own behaviour to better fit into this new landscape.

Learning how to be sociable without socializing in an online classroom

As we began problem solving, another major difference we noticed was that students weren't having a chance to socialize. Socializing with one's peers is a huge part of the school experience. When we are physically at school, we have the luxury of arrival, passing periods, lunch, etc. for students to actually socialize, that is, interact with others, offer greetings and welcome, and visit and converse to share ideas and interests. That kind of socializing rarely happens in the classroom itself. In fact, in high school and beyond, it really shouldn't happen in the classroom, and when it does it may be seen as disruptive or inappropriate.

In the world of distance learning, all of those opportunities were suddenly gone. Students logged into class, and the teaching began. There was little to no social interaction with peers.

At the same time, we do expect students to be sociable in class, that is, friendly, inviting, and congenial. That didn't change with online learning. Students still needed to read social cues, figure out when they could raise their hand or ask a question, keep their ideas and thoughts about other people's houses, families, or pets in their thought bubbles, and show respect by paying attention and engaging in classroom discussions.

While the concepts of socializing vs. being sociable were a bit too advanced to explore with students, I found it really important to help teachers, parents, and administrators understand the difference, so in turn, we could support students in both areas. Teachers needed to understand that this was new territory for our social learners and mistakes would be made. We coached teachers on ways to not call students out publicly, to help facilitate the practice of new social cues, and to try to create an atmosphere of acceptance and tolerance. Parents needed to understand that students weren't going to greet each other or chat during class, but that didn't necessarily mean their child was disliked or excluded. Parents also needed to know that we heard their concerns and were willing to try to create opportunities to keep working on and practicing those important relationship and friendship skills. Ultimately, those things were only able to happen with the understanding and buy-in of the administrator. Online learning is hard, and we needed all hands on deck working together.

Fostering progress toward social learning IEP goals through online learning

Finally, to respond to and truly continue working on some of the social learning IEP goals as written prior to online learning, we found that we needed to create opportunities for socialization outside of class time, but still during the school day. We intentionally scheduled opportunities for games, art projects, scavenger hunts, and virtual hangout times to allow students to visit, socialize, and nurture friendships. While these were all adult supervised and/or often facilitated by an adult, we tried to give students the chance to plan, choose, and engage others as independently as possible. Without that interaction, the world of distance learning was actually hindering social emotional learning progress.

Moving forward, as many of us will continue with online learning in the fall, we have the opportunity to be more intentional in our teaching and more supportive of our students with social emotional challenges. Reading, writing, and math are always important, but equally, if not more important, is our responsibility to support social emotional growth and mental health and academic learning. After all, there is a clear social-academic connection because the social mind guides comprehension and expression of socially based information within [curricula](#).

Teaching and modelling grit, resilience, and a growth mindset to overcome adversity and thrive

The good news is that educators are resilient. Even thrown into an entirely new way of teaching, we quickly adjusted and adapted to a new and challenging situation. The better news is that we are in the field of education because we want to help build that same resilience and grit in our students. We can't ensure that they won't face challenges along the way, but we can help them learn the skills needed to grow even in the midst of challenges.

In this moment in time we are perhaps facing some of this generation's greatest trials. What better time is there to nurture the skills and strategies needed to cope with and even overcome adversity? Our students can adapt and even thrive, given new tools and strategies. Let us help them shine in that spotlight.

*Anytime you are taking and using photos of students, either in the classroom or online, it is important to be aware of and follow GDPR regulations. Most schools have photography/video releases with explicit guidelines pertaining to whether or not the parents are comfortable with the school taking photos or videos of their student, as well

as explicit permission for how photos or videos can be used (for educational purposes, PR, website, etc.) I also like to share lessons and activities with parents, so we are all on the same page, using the same language, and being consistent in our expectations. These lessons were no exception.

**Avoid doing this type of lesson with students who have stronger social awareness and emerging social anxiety.

Recommended reading: [Building Resilience in Children – 20 Practical, Powerful Strategies (Backed by Science)](#)