

Pandemic Learning

A Video Series

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2020–21 Community Technology Empowerment Project



Special thanks to our Community Partners:

University of Minnesota Learning Technologies Media Lab

Saint Paul Neighborhood Network



Inspiration

Educational systems are at the heart of our communities, and their instability during the pandemic has had ripple effects felt in households around the world. Questions about the increasing inequality of access to education and the role of modern technology have become more important than ever as schools switch to remote learning. With public education under the spotlight once again, we finally have an opportunity to push for real change. Proper media attention to the underlying issues could play a big role in this pivotal time. The best thing that citizens can do is to stay informed and vocal about the challenges facing this pillar of society.

As members of this group, we were all interested in telling a story through the medium of video. We saw it as a way to portray a relatable message and immerse the audience in what's going on. Along with our interest in education and how it's changed during and since COVID, we felt inspired to create a documentary showing sides of the story to COVID that might not be as well known to very many people outside of schools. While we did not ultimately create a full-length documentary, our efforts still highlight the challenges and future of technology in education in easily-digestible video clips.



Project members and community partners set up filming equipment in the Saint Paul Neighborhood Network studio.

Impact

We began by reaching out to a variety of organizations, such as the University of Minnesota Learning Technologies Media Lab, St. Paul Federation of Teachers, Minnesota School Board Association, Minnesota Association of School Administrators, and Association of Metropolitan School Districts. In an effort to get interviewees, we also increased the visibility of the CTEP program with these far-reaching organizations.

Through our relationship with the LT Media Lab, we were able to begin our research with expert guidance. Two researchers offered us insights from the cutting edge of academic thinking on pandemic learning and directed us to recommended resources both from their own work and the field at large.



While most interviews were conducted at the SPNN studio, we were able to interview Ian Buck at the St. Paul high school where he teaches.

We then interviewed participants from these organizations on camera, asking questions like:

- What are the goals of education in the midst of a pandemic?
- What can we expect out of our students and teachers in such times of stress?
- How can we rebuild our systems to better support those who depend on them?

Topics that came up covered everything from the

transition to online learning to how we should be using this opportunity to shift priorities and focus on meeting the needs of students, however they show up to school. After completing five interviews, we reviewed video footage for themes and pared down the footage to short clips. When we determined a collection of short videos was the most feasible option, we edited the footage in conjunction with the common themes. These themes are:

- Transition to Online Learning
- What Changed with COVID-19
- Trauma/Support, Burnt Out Teachers, & Learning Loss/Shifting Priorities
- Challenges with COVID-19 and Online Teaching
- Digital Divide
- The Future of Online Learning
- Online Learning vs. Emergency Remote Teaching/Distance Learning

We researched news articles and stories from the timeline of the pandemic that aligned with the video topics to compile a list of similar stories in order to enhance the message. With all of this in hand, we designed a page on the SPNN website on which the resources and videos are featured. This allows us to send it out to anyone with a device and internet connection. Having



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our project on the internet means it will live on in perpetuity, can be viewed by future years' members, and can be utilized by educators for years to come. Additionally, being able to easily share these videos and resources opens up the possibility of public engagement around the topic. Communities or professional organizations could each set up conversations around an individual topic or the entire collection of videos, discussing the successes and failures of emergency remote teaching and how to move forward. It can also be used as an archive for looking back on what happened during this time when recent memory fades.

Our project paves the pathway to help future generations of youth and adults use technology to better access educational opportunities, one of the goals of CTEP. Additionally, one of the things that CTEP Members are often called upon to do—developing informational videos and websites with critical information for community members—is related to this work. We hope to provide community members with the knowledge of the impact COVID had on education and technology, which will empower them to make their voices heard in their communities and influence change in future years.

In terms of goals for the project, we feel we accomplished our main, underlying goal, which was to show real stories of what public education was like during the COVID-19 pandemic. We were able to hear interesting perspectives and give a voice to a part of society that is often overlooked, however, we were not able to capture the concerns of those most impacted by the pandemic and the digital divide. We also hoped we would



Project members met on Corps Days to plan next steps. Not planned: twinning!

create a documentary that was a critical analysis of how to effectively incorporate technology into schools, and whether it has been successful this year. Instead, we have a collection of clips that describes this, but is hard to fit together into a full documentary. We hoped we would be able to share a full documentary as a final product in some sort of screening event, inviting educational leaders, community members, and participants to come watch and discuss. While we were initially worried this would not be possible due to the pandemic, it became clear that this would not be possible due to the changed format of our product.

Risks & Challenges

Thankfully, many of the risks we considered did not arise, such as issues with technology, having to lockdown due to the pandemic again, or an interviewee revoking their consent.

However, one risk we considered--that we may have a hard time finding willing participants--did come up, which was our major stumbling block. We were interested in speaking to those on the frontlines of education, like teachers and students, but these were also the people who were the busiest during the school year and did not have any extra time to spare to talk with us. This shows just how hard it was to “stay afloat” with this emergency remote teaching model, whether you are a student or teacher. As a result, we had to adjust our final project and we only have one



Project members tested lighting while staging an interview in the SPNN studio.

interview with a teacher to add to the voices of educational researchers and administrators. Further, we only heard from those for which the transition through COVID went relatively well. This is understandable, given that, if it didn't go well, potential interviewees were likely struggling to even stay afloat in the normal business of education, much less set aside time to meet with our group. With that in mind, our research prevents a slightly skewed image of what it really was like for everyone, but is accurate for many. Between that and the fact that we weren't able to get inside any school buildings or get online in any virtual classrooms due to safety concerns for schools and COVID restrictions, meaning we could not get any B-roll footage, we ended up transitioning away from a full documentary as our final product, instead making short video clips about various topics and broadcasting them on the SPNN website and YouTube page.

We were able to complete our project without any funds, even those we budgeted for. Group members had existing licenses for video production software, and we did not need to purchase any thank you gifts for interviewees that might have had a harder time taking the time to interview with us, such as students and families. We are very grateful for the help of one of our Community Partners, the St. Paul Neighborhood Network, for providing us with cameras, microphones, studio space, and technical assistance, all free of charge.

Community

Where we leave this project opens ample opportunities for continued development of a full documentary using our existing footage. As Aileen is serving another year with CTEP, she will hold the raw footage until a longer-term file storage solution can be determined, or the project is taken up next year. That would make an even more engaging product around which to create conversations, but even with the current state

of the videos, clips could be screened with community meetings or at meetings of the education organizations we originally reached out to for discussion. Both community members and these education organizations will be instrumental in moving the needle forward on education and it's important they understand a holistic picture of how technology fits in. Even more, community members without connection to schools should understand the importance of technology in education in order to support further school funding and local referenda. Beyond just technology in education, this moment provides an opportunity for further appreciation of education professionals and educators. Something many interviewees brought up was how much scrutiny these folks have received while trying to make sure their students are learning, not to mention ensuring their safety and wellness. Hopefully further engagement around these topics will produce a greater understanding of what teachers have gone through in recent school years, which will garner respect.

This project has been a great learning experience about civic engagement. Two simple, but important, takeaways came up. First, there were varied responses from people about telling their stories. Some people, like the researchers for example, were eager to share since they typically had a hard time getting their voices heard. Others, such as the administrators, were very willing and excited to tell their stories, but the stories seemed to lack the urgency that some brought to our conversation. This may be related to the topic, but is more likely a reflection of how people engage in general with their communities and how they get involved. Further, those that have opportunities to speak capitalize on that momentum and continue to do so, while there is a hard hurdle to get over to get started if you want your voice to be heard. The second takeaway is that teamwork really matters. Primarily from our own experience, we had a really great group of people working together on this project, which made sure that we were able to share responsibilities and everybody felt comfortable with each other's workload. Everyone has been responsive and saw their place in the big picture. Outside of just ourselves, something we observed from the interviewees is how much teamwork matters to them, too. A common theme is that when everyone was trying to go at it by themselves, there was chaos. But when everyone appreciated the urgency of the situation and was working together—for example, participating in a big planning meeting right when COVID first hit—things were able to be executed. This type of team mentality allowed schools to adopt new technologies with speed that never happened during normal school years. With the future of wraparound support services and “community schools,” everyone will be working as a team to support our most vulnerable students. It truly does take a village.