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Opinion: Pandemic's toll on student learning persists; let's fix that

After the fluidity of online classes, helping pupils readapt to real-world studies is as important as the content they learn.

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"The hiatus on standardized exams during the era of Zoom learning, coupled with teachers' leniency on assignment deadlines, has given way to a shock for students and parents alike, as the Ministry of Education reinstates exams with stricter grading policies," writes James Watts, principal at Education Plus High School in St-Laurent. PHOTO BY SAM WASSON /Getty Images

High school education is a formidable challenge. Educators strive to ignite academic curiosity in adolescents, whose evolving neurons and hormonal surges often gravitate toward more self-indulgent distractions. Adding to these persistent forces are the enduring repercussions of the pandemic on student learning, aptly termed “lost-learnings” by some researchers.

Many teachers have noted a deficiency in crucial knowledge stemming from the COVID years as students progress through the educational system. However, it’s not just about the tangible loss of academic content; it’s about the profound lessons we’ve learned during those online classes.

The pandemic compelled our students to rely heavily on their smartphones for information and entertainment during lockdown boredom. Students learned to be always connected. This dependence has become so entrenched that some schools, guided by [the Ministry of Education’s directive](#), resort to banning phones, inadvertently fostering a clandestine culture among students – bathroom stalls have become the new telephone booths!

Creative educators attempt to integrate technology into their teaching methods, but the need for a dedicated course on phone etiquette becomes increasingly apparent.

The hiatus on standardized exams during the era of Zoom learning, coupled with teachers’ leniency on assignment deadlines, has given way to a shock for students and parents alike, as the Ministry of Education reinstates exams with stricter grading policies. During the pandemic, our students navigated courses without showcasing their proficiency. This adjustment has left a palpable void in motivation and study skills, particularly noticeable among our students who are gearing up for ministry exams.

There is resistance to classroom quizzes that seems rooted in two years of not having to actively participate in information retrieval, knowledge acquisition and closed-book assessments.

While it’s acknowledged that standardized exams often measure a student’s ability to take exams rather than truly indicating mastery of the material, the reality is that exams are back. As educators, our priority is to ensure the success of our students in this revived examination landscape. It’s crucial that we support them in developing the skills needed not just to perform well on exams but to genuinely master the subject matter.

The pandemic also revealed a shift in parental involvement, as some of our students’ parents found themselves with more free time and actively participated in their children’s projects and assignments. Young people learned that their parents enjoyed the distraction of a science project or an ethics assignment. The impact of parents’ continued involvement is evident in the disparity between work completed at home and that done in the classroom. Artificial intelligence programs also require teachers to rethink any assignment sent home.

Marking both AI and parent work is challenging. How do we send a parent-made project home with a failing grade? Does it create cognitive dissonance for students when their teachers correct AI essays?

The pandemic has prompted a philosophical reflection on the fluidity of time. Online learning allowed for assignments to be submitted at unconventional hours, reshaping perceptions of deadlines and time constraints. The bureaucratic nature of school schedules, deadlines and time limits is now perceived by many students as oppressive. Delays and extensions – the norm in Montreal roadwork – are assumed by students on assignments, projects and tests. Helping students readapt to schedules and time limits is as important as the content they learn in these frameworks.

While addressing gaps in academic knowledge is feasible, the challenge lies in rectifying ingrained habits developed during the pandemic. As students receive their first term reports, the forgotten notion of consequences might be catastrophic. Grades, once seemingly dispensed like Halloween candy, now require genuine effort.

Despite the initial shock, most students display resilience. For others, mid-course adjustments in study routines become essential. Lost learnings can be reclaimed and false learnings must be rectified, as the pathway to critical learning is reinstated for our adaptable and diligent students.

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