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Amanda Woods

Grovetown Middle School, amandaliz1106@gmail.com

Stacie K. Pettit

Augusta University, Augusta, Georgia, spettit@augusta.edu

Christi Pace

Augusta University, CHPACE@augusta.edu

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Quaranteaching in the Time of Covid-19: Exemplar from a Middle Grades Virtual Classroom

Amanda Woods
Grovetown Middle School

Stacie K. Pettit
Christi L. Pace
Augusta University

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic dropped educators across the world straight into remote learning with little time to prepare. As some have inevitably struggled, other middle grades educators have overcome beginning hurdles to not only survive but thrive amidst this new challenge. One teacher in particular, despite being in her first year, has found innovative ways to connect and motivate her middle grades students in a virtual environment. This article extends the steps, tips, and resources article (Pace, Pettit, & Barker, also in this issue) to provide a personal example of the successes (and yet still challenges) that exist when “quaranteaching” is done well. From TikTok videos, to Kahoot games played over Zoom, to contests to encourage attendance and increase motivation, Amanda Woods, winner of the National Association of Professors of Middle Level Education (NAPOMLE) Teacher Candidate of the Year in 2019, shares how she continues to meet the developmental needs of her young middle grades students even when she cannot see them physically each day.

Keywords: COVID-19, online instruction, distance learning, virtual strategies

“I don’t come to Mrs. Woods’s zoom meetings because...”
“I back out at the last minute because I don’t think I look good on camera.” - 6th grade girl
“I’m in trouble or busy.” - 6th grade boy

Two weeks into our learn from home program and my middle graders' participation in my live lessons and activities was less than stellar. I posted the day's activities with an instructional video each day. I made the lessons fun and engaging by using multiple websites and resources. I made silly videos of me teaching the topic with filters from snapchat. But, I still wasn't getting the participation level and excitement I desired. I wondered what I was doing wrong. So, I reverted to what I always do when I struggle in the classroom. I turned to my students for answers.

- Amanda Woods

The above vignette illustrates the reflections of a passionate first year teacher, Amanda Woods, just two weeks after being thrust into “crisis teaching” with very little warning or preparation. As past president of the Augusta University Collegiate Middle Level Association (CMLA), we were curious about how Amanda was dealing with “quaranteaching” during this time of COVID-19. So, we caught up with her and learned that despite some initial hurdles, she and her students have moved beyond surviving to thriving. In this article, we share Amanda’s journey as a sixth grade math teacher in the final nine weeks of her first year of teaching as the COVID-19 pandemic became a reality that none of us were prepared to address.

Amanda’s Background

To more fully appreciate how Amanda has moved from surviving to thriving with online teaching amidst COVID-19, understanding how she came to teaching provides a context for better understanding. After spending eight years in the military as a linguist, Amanda decided it was time to return to her original dream of becoming a teacher. She found her calling at Augusta University while enrolled in Dr. Pettit’s course, *The Nature and Needs of the Middle Grades Learner*. Here, she learned the middle school mantra of “relationships first, content second”, which resonated with exactly why she wanted to become a teacher. Working through the middle grades teacher preparation courses, 6-8 years older than most of her peers, Amanda strove to be the best and inspire others along the way. Throughout her time in college, she co-presented with

her professors at AMLE's 2017 conference, won a grant as Augusta University's CMLA President to present at AMLE's 2018 conference, won Outstanding Undergraduate Student in Middle Grades Education 2018-2019, and the National Association of Professors of Middle Level Education (NAPOMLE) Teacher Candidate of the Year in 2019. Recently, her school district nominated her as one of three top finalists for "Rookie of the Year". All of these accomplishments have helped Amanda build a strong foundation as a teacher capable of handling any educational challenge, including the most recent one of transitioning her sixth grade math class to online teaching and learning.

The Quaranteaching Journey Begins

This past March after schools in other parts of the country had already shut down and positive COVID-19 cases in Georgia were on the rise, Amanda's school district made the difficult decision to move all of their classes online. This is also when she began keeping a journal about her experiences. On Tuesday, March 17, the exact day that students and teachers found out they would begin "Learn From Home", which they thought at the time was temporary, Amanda recorded the following words in her journal:

My classes were tiny today. At the end of the day, we walked the kids all the way down to the buses and waved as they drove away. I cried. I'm worried about the students with bad home lives, about the ones who never do work in class, so why would they do work online? More than all that, I'm sad I won't get to see their faces and smiles every day. I'm gonna miss my classroom. It's so warm and welcoming. Best of all it has routines embedded in it! I thrive when on a routine. This is going to be a challenge. At least one state, Kansas, has come out and said they will not return to school this year! WHAT? This is crazy. This cannot be how my first year of teaching ends! I didn't even get to say goodbye to half my kids. I really hope Georgia doesn't have to do this.

The very next day, teachers were expected to have work prepared for their students to learn from home. There was no time to get platforms prepared or instructions sent out. Many teachers, like Amanda, are parents, so with schools closed new responsibilities included not only

having a child in the home while working, but “homeschooling” also ensued using the resources provided from teachers. The experience for Amanda went like this:

March 18: Day one of learning from home. I'm working way harder than I did when we were in class. I don't even know how that is possible. I worked fixing videos, making slides, leaving video feedback for each individual student, and replying to student questions on Google Classroom. Then I ran - gotta get that self care in. I am dead tired. I really hope these kids watch their feedback videos. Days left until we go back to school: 38

Days continued like this for Amanda, just as they have for other teachers across the country navigating this abrupt change from all they had previously known. Sometimes the stress reaches a tipping point. The same was true for Amanda Woods.

Online Teaching is Not for the Faint of Heart

While it's easy to conceptualize teachers enjoying this time by staying home in pajamas all day, in reality teachers are working harder than ever to contact students, to connect with them, and to provide meaningful instruction from a distance. Unlike face-to-face teaching, online instruction requires teachers to be available to their students beyond the normal 7:30 AM- 2:00 PM school day. Providing assistance and feedback also isn't as easy as when a student raises her hand in the classroom and asks for help. Teachers are finding that what used to be a simple response to students now takes more time. Because most every direction and student reply must be explicitly written, it takes teachers more time to craft their lessons and put them online.

Amanda illustrates this arduous task in the following journal entry:

March 24: My day started like all my “learn from home” days have thus far. I snoozed my alarm until 6:30 AM then finally forced myself out of bed. I curled my hair and got dressed so I would feel more motivated to work. I hadn't posted today's assignment into Google Classroom for more than 20 minutes before THE question started rolling in. I made a video last night to help them navigate Google Classroom and the slides I had made to put their assignments on. And yet, I had a student claim that she still couldn't find an assignment. I wanted to bang my head against the desk. Instead, I asked her to meet me in Zoom so I could screen share and help her since she continues to have issues. After I showed her where to find her assignments, she posted again in Google Classroom the following message: “Best Teacher Ever!!!!” Of course it had a lot more emojis, but it made me feel a bit better.

Remember when Amanda said she lived by the mantra “Relationships first, content second”? Well, here she is putting that into practice. When she showed her student that she cared enough to meet one-on-one with her to explain that which may have not “needed” explaining, her student was able to succeed. Relationships are of utmost importance in middle level education (Virtue, 2018). This also holds true when working with administrators and other faculty. Teachers can no longer pop into their administrator’s office to get quick advice. That, too, takes time. In the following journal entry, we get a short glimpse of Amanda’s experience:

We were scheduled to have a meeting via Zoom with our assistant principal. Everyone hopped on, and he went through some things and asked how we were and if we had any questions. No one asked anything. I felt like I was going to lose my mind. I have a thousand questions and stresses I wanted to talk about, but I wasn’t about to hold up 18 other people so that this first year teacher, who is clearly the only one freaking out, can ask some questions. So, we hung up, and I cried. Then, I emailed our assistant principal and let all my stresses and frustrations out. Grades, keeping track of all the assignments, keeping track of the kids turning things in at all hours of the day and on different days, trying to be engaging, constantly repeating myself...I could go on. He was really nice and called me to help me calm down. Days left until we go back to school: 32

Additionally, this journal entry highlights the role of middle level leaders and principals as an important factor in the success of middle schools (NMSA, 2010). They truly set the tone for a school, despite whether teaching within a brick and mortar classroom or the imaginary walls of a virtual classroom.

Negotiating Online Teaching and Learning

After 14 long days of trying to plan online math instruction, uploading activities, and being present for her students, Amanda noticed that her sixth graders’ participation still waned, and the majority simply were not logging on to her synchronous meetings. In an attempt to negotiate this transition to online teaching and learning and to get a better grasp of the situation, she went straight to her sixth graders to find out. She developed some questions that she asked her

students to answer that might provide some insight. Student responses were overwhelming, Amanda recalls. Below are the questions she asked, a summary of student responses, and what she implemented as a result of gathering this information.

Questions:

What would make learning from home a better experience for you?
I would be more likely to come to Mrs. Woods's zoom meetings if she...
Any other thoughts on how I can make this experience better for you?
I wish Mrs. Woods would ____ like my other teachers.

The students reported that they wanted instructional videos with some specific requests for TikTok videos. Many students wanted to choose what color Mrs. Woods would dye her hair. They also wanted more games. Mrs. Woods' students said they did not want her to do anything in particular like their other teachers because some said she was perfect or the most organized. The overall response was that the students wanted their other teachers to be more like Mrs. Woods.

Since almost half of her students loved the idea of getting to pick the color she would dye her hair, how could she not jump at this challenge? She decided that if 50% of her students attended a Zoom meeting within one week, Mrs. Woods would let them choose her hair color. Is her hair blue yet? No, but her Zoom attendance jumped from 8% to 33% of students attending! There's no doubt that Ms. Woods and her students will get there, especially with pie in the face as the next motivator!

Most importantly, asking for her students' input shows Amanda seeking successful ways to negotiate and adapt to this online teaching situation in a positive manner by prioritizing her relationship with her students, being developmentally responsive, and using the unique characteristics of young adolescents to help her make decisions (Ellerbrock, 2016). By including her middle graders in her quest to find out what she could do to help them be more successful,

she was giving them a sense of autonomy over their learning (Alley, 2019). She recalls thinking, That's what it's all about, the students.

Together, as shared stakeholders in their learning, these sixth grade students know that Amanda thrives on their advice, direction, and preferences, recognizing there is always room for an educator to grow. Now more than ever, middle grades educators have to be of this mindset in order to succeed in this challenging learn from home scenario.

Striving Not Just Surviving

*March 26: I feel like I'm finding a groove with this online thing. I assigned a small word problem, and most of my kids completed it! I even gave them a challenge problem. I was watching "Harry Potter" last night with my daughter, and there is a scene when Harry is on the Knight Bus and it halts to a stop because there is a lady crossing the street. In that scene a shriveled head counts down while the lady walks across the street; he says, "10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 3 ½, 2, 1 ¾." I asked them to find the mistake in his "number line." Of course, all the kids kept asking where the number line was *insert slamming my head into my desk here* But, I'm going to continue trying to add more fun and games into their assignments, so the kids stay engaged. I guess as long as I don't give up and keep trying new things, I haven't lost. Right?*

Pace and Pettit (2020) explain that two important aspects of successful online instruction are culture and collaboration. Amanda understands this and allows students to play Kahoot, Gimkit, Quizlet Live, and Quizizz over Zoom and Google Meet. It's hard being a teacher and wanting to teach live lessons when most of your students are not in attendance, and all they want to do is talk to one another. Can you blame them? Good teachers just want to talk to their students, too. Everyone is craving human interaction and fun! These games bring that to life! Amanda tries to mix up which platform she uses based on the kids in attendance and their preferences. She always plays against the kids to foster that competitive spirit, which also gives her a chance to work the problems out ahead of time so after the game is over she can review the most commonly missed questions with them! Please see Pace, Pettit, and Barker, also in this issue, for additional technological resources to support online instruction amidst COVID-19.

Amanda's students are also obsessed with TikTok, and rightfully so. She reminds us, "This is not a new strategy. There are so many amazing educators who have been using this tool for months to years. Students love it!" Amanda claims she is not clever enough to come up with her own themes or songs for the kids yet, but there are so many other educators who have done this already for other educators to use. What is better than finding a multiplication song that is less than one minute long to a song the kids know and love? TikTok is an amazing resource for creative and innovative educators. Based on the feedback from her students, Amanda tries to post at least one TikTok a week that is educational (sometimes without them realizing it). Links to some of these example videos are included at the end of the article.

Quaranteaching, the New Normal

April 1: It's official. The thing I have been hoping wouldn't happen has finally happened. We won't be going back to school this year. Learning from home will continue the rest of the school year. Days left until we go back to school: ~~26~~ → 127

Teaching online has been challenging for middle level educators across the globe. For Amanda, it has made her question a lot about her teaching philosophy because giving conceptual math problems is hard to do when students don't have the ability to work through problems together or have her next to them telling them to keep trying. The productive struggle often is not present in the virtual classroom because many students just give up. Teachers have had to completely rethink how to teach online. But, for at least Amanda, she has learned about so many great resources that she will definitely make better use of next year when students are (hopefully) back in the classrooms. She has also been able to draw on the ISTE (2007) standards she learned how to implement primarily through a key assessment completed in her teacher preparation program, "The Online Teaching Module" (Pettit & Edwards, 2018). This experience has made

her better equipped to use technology as a teaching tool. As one example, here is what Amanda's plans for students looked like prior to learning from home:

Thursday 20 February 2020

MATERIALS NEEDED	LEARNING INTENTIONS	TASKS
Pencil, Calculator	What am I learning? I am learning volume of a right rectangular prism using the formula.	Notes on Volume
PROCEDURES Put your bags under the whiteboard neatly.	Why am I learning this? So that I can understand how volume within a three dimensional prism is found.	Volume Practice -Right Rectangular Prisms -Fractional edges
	How will I know when I learned it? <input type="checkbox"/> I can use the formulas to find volume of rectangular prisms in situations from the real-world.	HOUSE POINTS Gold Courageous Dragons: 171 Black Fearless Pandas: 171

Here is an example of the plans provided to students virtually. There are similarities, such as listing their tasks or assignments and materials for them to see. The difference is that there are no worksheets; everything (assignments, trackers, attendance questions, meetings) is digitally linked.

ATTENDANCE QUESTION WHAT DID YOU DO For spring break? POST YOUR ANSWER HERE

Tuesday April 14th

Follow me on Instagram for funny shout outs & updates! @mrswoodsteachespeaches

Are you missing work? Check [HERE!](#)

ASSIGNMENT:	LINKS:	MATERIALS:
1. Adding Integers Practice 2. If this takes less than 30 minutes, work the rest of the time in iReady. 3. Google Meet @ 1. Link: Set an alarm! Who cares what you look like!	Mrs. Woods's Morning video Adding Integers Video Help	Computer/Phone

TODAY IS... International Moment of Laughter Day. Find something to laugh about today.

Conclusion

We've all seen the news reports and read the papers about how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted teaching and learning and how teachers are simply trying to get through this global pandemic. Moving classes online, making sure students have access to technology, and getting them actively engaged in learning have been at the forefront of teachers' minds during this time of *quaranteaching*. Similar to previous research, we feel that educators with specialized middle level teacher preparation, especially who have gone through a professional development school model like Amanda, have an advantage on how to meet the needs of young adolescents no matter what the environment (Mertens, 2018; Virtue, 2018).

One thing the authors hope we can all take away from this experience is how precious education is. Even teachers can take the daily routine for granted as they go through the motions some days, forgetting how powerful each day that a child steps foot in our class is a day to grow them and ourselves: mentally, emotionally, alone and as a team. This shared crisis will hopefully make us stronger as a collective of teachers armed with the empowerment that we can accomplish much with little to no notice, armed with teamwork that we never thought possible as we reach across the nation and world to work together to educate the future in creative and alternative ways. To those educators who may be struggling, we encourage you to take a break, ask for help, have a growth mindset, and know that we are all in this together. We are all facing the same struggles, and we are all willing to help one another. Start small; don't be a hero who tries to do it all. Finally, it's okay to look at an activity, assignment, or test and to throw it away and try something else. Do what works for you and for your students because that's all we can do.

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Video Links:

[Do your assignments! TikTok](#)

[Adding Opposites](#)

[Choice Board Review Template](#)

[Singing](#)

[Hair dying challenge](#)