

LIBRARIES, LEARNING & LOCKDOWN: THE NEW NORMAL

By Kerry Gittins

BIOGRAPHY



KERRY GITTINS

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Unprecedented. Extraordinary. Historic. Abnormal. Pandemic. Social distancing. Life as we know it.

These words are not new to me. I know them. I know how to use them in a sentence, put them in context, use them in conversation, and understand their meaning.

But when COVID-19 began to change the way we live on this planet, it turns out I didn't know them at all. Not really. I didn't understand them because they had never directly affected me. Never affected my work, my family, my life, my day-to-day existence. I certainly understand them now.

After 11 weeks of worrying, wondering, hoping and trying to make sense of the new normal, I understand them completely.

My husband and I were on holiday for Vietnamese New Year in late January, by the beach, having a lovely time. We kept a close eye, though, on what was happening with this new coronavirus as, having experienced SARS in 2002, we knew things could change rapidly. Flights to and from China had been stopped already and the Vietnamese government was starting to isolate confirmed cases and track those that had been in contact with them. We knew schools in China had closed and that the same would most likely happen here. The announcement came from the Vietnamese government that same week that schools would be closed to students from the following Monday for two weeks. They would reassess the situation at the end of that time and inform us of what would happen next. The atmosphere became surreal. Like a dystopian novel.

During that same week my husband, who's the principal of our school, was in contact with the other international school principals to try and find solutions to enable our students to continue their learning with as little disruption as possible. Not that easy when you haven't had time to gather your staff and students beforehand and give them a heads-up as to what that would be like and how it would happen. I kept thinking:

"How am I going to get books to students? How can I keep them reading? How can they borrow? How will they return books? How am I going to support the senior students with their research



and essays? How can I support teachers and our local staff?"

Because as teacher librarians, that's what we do — we support the *whole* school. How was I going to do that effectively online?

Teachers are face-to-face people. We *talk* to our students. As teacher librarians, we guide our students in their research, advise them in their book choices, show them what's new on the shelves, read them stories (with all the voices!) and have them read to us (with all the voices!) and we offer them a welcoming and safe space away from the classroom and playground, especially for the students who find those places overwhelming.

Students come to the library because they can be not alone, but just not together with everyone else for a while. We work in a unique environment within a school setting, and in international schools, this unique environment is important for the *whole* school community — parents, international staff and local staff as well. And it works because we make sure it does — by being there, by being present, by being available for all of them. Most teacher librarians are pretty technologically savvy, but this was different. I wasn't going to be present I was going to be 'virtual', and that was going to be challenging.

Online learning is not new, and it works pretty well, so you might think it was a given that online learning would be the solution. Universities have been doing it for a long time. So have schools where subjects cannot be offered on campus and students complete those courses online. But there has always been the counterbalance to that of most regular teaching being conducted in a face-to-face, instructional environment. Having that environment flipped completely and almost instantaneously where *all* teaching was now being offered online, needed to be carefully thought through and worked out in a way that made it successful and meaningful for everyone.

We're a Pre-K to 13 school and although we knew most students would be okay with online learning, we also knew there were issues that needed to be addressed before it began. What platform would be used to deliver learning? We're an Office 365 school, so Microsoft Teams was the logical answer but not all staff were familiar with it so we would have to organise training and fast. Would Microsoft Teams be suitable for all students, especially three- to seven-year-olds? What does online learning even look like for three- to seven-year-olds? They have access to and use technology in class, but their lessons are very much hands-on and face-to-face. How could we tweak that for an online environment?

And keep in mind that we thought it might only be for two weeks or maybe four. No one had any idea it would last as long as it has.

But teachers are *excellent* problem solvers and *very* resilient and by the Wednesday of that first week back at school, we had solutions found and issues sorted. In the first two weeks of online learning our Early Years teachers and I made lots of read-aloud story videos and had loads of fun acting out stories in the playground, which we uploaded to a password-protected, secure, school-based website that the students and their parents were used to using, which was my library website.

Teachers sent daily Flipgrid videos and emails with lessons attached to parents in the primary school and secondary teachers conducted synchronous and asynchronous sessions via Microsoft Teams.

I constantly scoured the web for free read-aloud story book and audio book sites which I shared with the rest of the staff, students and parents. I didn't worry too much at that stage about borrowing and returning as it was only for two weeks. Famous last words!

It wasn't long before it all had to be tweaked again as it was obvious things were not going to get better and were, in fact, heading in the opposite direction. So that's what we did. We tweaked the online learning and have continued to tweak and improve as we go along.

Library had always been included in the weekly lesson overviews in the Primary School, but after the first two weeks I began setting some tasks that helped me gauge how much students were reading. Easy things for the younger ones like drawing their favourite part of the story, designing their own house/scary vegetable/boat or retelling a story in their own words and uploading it to the class Flipgrid.



For the older students it was talking them through how to make book trailers, guiding them through keyword searching and use of our databases, redesigning book covers or looking at digital citizenship scenarios.

I also found lots of other interesting sites to share that were just for fun, like the many live read-alouds, drawing and writing sessions given by some of our incredible well-known authors and illustrators, the amazing virtual museum and zoo tours on offer and the really interesting variety of free podcasts available. I was conscious not to overload the students as they already had enough to deal with from their regular teachers and with the situation itself.

Being involved in the synchronous lessons was fantastic. It was so wonderful to see the students, to be able to talk with them, read to them, and touch base with how they were feeling about everything. And if there is anything that can be seen as a positive for parents during this time, it's that they have a greater respect for their children's teachers and a better understanding of what they do!

Getting actual books to and from students was, and still is, a challenge. We've managed to make this happen two or three times over the past 11 weeks, but during lockdown that wasn't an option



at all. When I could, I placed a large plastic box with 'Library Book Box' stuck all over it just inside the gate near security at the front of the school where books could be collected and dropped off. I created borrowing forms for books, both online on the library website and in hard copy, which were available at security for the different grade levels. I made a video of what to do and how to do it and shared this via our Facebook page, email and the library website. We would then collate the requests and have the books ready for collection on specific days. Parents and students could also request a book through our library management system (LMS) or email us with a specific title.

We had to be mindful of keeping the books virus-free too. I'd been reading the information sent out by the various library associations and the World Health Organization (WHO) to see what the best approach would be. Like everything else, it was also in a constant state of flux. We erred on the side of caution as much as we could and made sure we wore surgical-style gloves and masks at all times when we handled the books, and for ones that were returned, we placed them on a cleaned trolley for 24 hours, before wiping down the front and back covers with a disinfectant wipe or cloth and then re-shelving them.

So, here we are at the end of April and, finally, after weeks of lockdown and self-isolation, the government decreed we were allowed back into our schools on Monday 27 April 27 — 12 weeks after it all began.

As I walked into my library that morning it felt wonderful and weird at the same time.

Wonderful because I was back in my 'zone', in that special place where so many incredible, uplifting, challenging, funny and amazing stories are patiently



waiting for some eager hand to grab them off the shelf and become immersed in a world other than their own. Wonderful to be back in that special place where students rush up to you asking, “Have you got the next book in this series yet? It was soooo funny!” or “This was such a great story. Have you read it? It was all about this girl who ...” or “Ms Kerry, can you help me find a book about dinosaurs/insects/cooking/space ...”

Weird because I was back but there was no one else there apart from me and my two exceptional local library assistants. Our library felt cavernous and empty — and quiet. A teacher librarian with no students to teach, working in a very silent library is not normal and definitely weird but — at least we were back!

We are slowly moving towards a time where our students can come back to their schools, albeit one stage at a time. We still have to maintain and observe the social distancing and health regulations whilst on site, which means students must be seated 1.5 metres apart in classrooms, learning areas (including libraries, sporting fields and playgrounds) and all of us must wear masks at all times. We will still have to ensure students choose books carefully and any that are handled and not borrowed will be placed on the cleaned trolley which we’ve called the ‘Changed My Mind’ trolley!

It’s another way of teaching and learning but at least this time we will be face to face.

Support for each other from colleagues all over the world during this time has been amazing and humbling. So many have shared so much and it’s a wonderful reflection of how generous we can be as human beings. And we really are the fortunate ones. There are teachers in places around the world who don’t have schools to return to, let alone libraries, and who struggle to have even the basic materials or learning environments that we take for granted.

As we take our first steps forward and embrace the future, my hope is that we continue to be mindful of and support each other. Let’s continue to share and to stay connected and keep building a learning community without boundaries or borders in our new normal.