

## **Distance Learning: A Global Perspective Spring 2021**

(background music)

**Emily:** Hi, my name is Emily Haas. A few months ago some MSAB students got together with Jeanette Pelletier, a Northfield high schooler working on her Girl Scout Gold Award project. Jeanette is working with us to connect MSAB with another school for the blind in Eastern Europe. It all started in 2017 when Jeanette and her family hosted Ana Sikhashvili from Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia. Together they decided to do projects from their own countries to advocate for the blind and low vision learners and to help Ana's school by collecting Braille books and learning supplies for them to use. In this podcast, Jeanette asks MSAB students Tori, Josh, and Pablo questions about how they had been impacted by distance learning and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Later she asked the same questions to the school in Georgia with Ana translating.

**Jeanette:** Have you found that school has been accessible to use from your home? Like can you easily, like, do each subject from your house?

**Tori:** I have found that for the most part, school is accessible. There are a couple of the video/Skype programs like Google Meet that are not the most accessible things in the world, but luckily now we have sort of found a way to make our school days accessible and found what works and what doesn't. I think after all of this time it just was kind of an experiment of what does work and what doesn't.

(music)

**Emily:** The same question was asked of the students in Georgia. If you hear glitches in the audio, it's because Ana is pausing to translate for the students at her school who speak Georgian.

(a student speaking in Georgian in the background)

**Ana (translating for a student):** Well distance learning, as for everyone, it was so big challenge for me because it started when it was time to graduate from school and we were preparing for the exams. We needed to work more with our teachers. But you know it started and everything got very difficult. Yeah, there were some times when I was so confused and I didn't know what to do. At some point I got scared because I did not know what I would do, how I would manage it, what our government would offer us. At first we started learning through Microsoft Teams, which I actually managed to learn how to use. But in general after I started university I kind of like distance learning.

**Emily:** Students were asked what the main resource or application was that they used during distance learning. While we use Zoom, Schoology and other platforms, the students in Georgia

felt very limited to what their teachers or parents knew. Keep in mind that Josh, Tori and Pablo are transition students who are likely older than some of the students being interviewed from Tbilisi, and may it be doing their work more independently because of their age. We think that our younger students at MSAB would also admit that their parents and teachers had a lot to learn this year.

**Jeanette:** What is the main resource that you use when you are doing school at home, which could be like a device, it could be an app or like a website or something. What's the main thing that you use?

**Josh:** I mainly use my phone and then my laptop and when it comes to apps it's pretty much Apple Notes, just their standard notes that they have built in, and then Schoology and Zoom of course.

**Ana (translating for student):** In general, Georgian people found it difficult to start using digital system. It was so difficult for them and it was so difficult for the parents because they had never used digital resources before and it was new experience for them to use Microsoft Teams, Word documents and other online products. For example, parents do not know what's learning was Microsoft Teams or what's Zoom. They have no clue because they grew up during the time when there was no computer, there was no Internet and so on. They know how to use Facebook, but they don't know how to use official products. Our teachers also might not be able to learn because they are the representatives of the old generation, so they have no clue how to use those platforms.

**Emily:** The next question showed how opposite the students were in their challenges regarding a remote learning. When asked what the easiest and hardest thing about distance learning was, both groups of students answered the opposite. Again, this could have been because the American students interviewed are ages 19 and 20 years old.

**Jeanette:** What is the easiest part about distance learning? And then, what is the hardest?

**Tori:** I think the easiest part is scheduling your time because you don't have really a set schedule, so you can make it for yourself and if you're pretty good at that, then it kind of- one, it helps you get better at scheduling your time, and two if you are already decent at it, it's a nice way to make sure that you have a lot of extra free time.

(a student speaking in Georgian in the background)

**Ana (translating for a student):** What made very difficult is for me, for example, is time managing. I don't know. It became very difficult for me because I do not have very strict schedule as it would be, for example, course for high schoolers. For example, every day I have lectures, but all of them are on different time. For example, one can be at 9:00 AM in the morning. Another one can be at 3:00 PM. Another one can be at 6:00 PM. Until the lecture starts, I can just go and sleep or be very calm, but I don't really like that because I don't like to be at home and not be active. It's not my type of life. I don't like it. I have to be active. I have to

be involved in many activities. I have to walk outside and so on. This is too difficult to be at home in one place all the time and it just... It's just so boring to be at home and you will think people all the time.

(background music)

**Emily:** Around the globe, COVID has impacted everyone, but what if we had this chance to change something about distance learning? The students were asked that question.

**Jeanette:** If you could change one thing about distance learning to make it easier, what would it be, if anything?

**Pablo:** For me, if there's one thing I could change about distance learning, it's to not have it at all. We just kind of got to go with the flow at this point. And I think the most important thing is you know we all gotta stick together. Despite everything.

**Tori:** For what we have to be doing now, I think it's going pretty well.

(student speaking Georgian in background)

**Ana (translating for a student):** I hope that teachers, and in general people will have an opportunity to move from Messenger to Zoom more official platform or classes. I don't know to be honest, because I have done everything that I could do during online life. I call it like this: online life. So now I don't know what else should I do. Now I just feel that I don't have anything else to do so I just have to cope with the environment and cope with the situation and wait for face to face meetings, which I hope will be very soon.

**Emily:** It was super interesting discussing challenges, successes and how students at both blind schools learned during the pandemic. We hope to do something like this again, but maybe about something a little more fun and with both the students together in real time! We wish Ana and all of the students graduating the best of luck and hope things can get back to normal soon.

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