



AUTISM CLASSROOM RESOURCES PODCAST EPISODE 31: DISTANCE LEARNING IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

URL: <http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode31>

Welcome back. I'm your host Christine Reeve and if you are listening to this around the time it was recording in March 2020 then you probably feel much like I do. This week has been the longest year of my life. And this month just keeps getting longer. It's amazing that just last week in episode 30, I was talking about how to prepare your students for leaving school...and many of you never got to see your students before you knew you were shutting down.

Need for Distance Education

For those who aren't listening at that time, to give you some context...we are in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools are closed and we are trying to figure out how to provide services during this time.

I definitely do not claim to know all the answers to all the many questions. But, there are a couple of things I can tell you are universal at this point and time. Confusion. Concern. Uncertainty. And probably a smidgen of frustration because we have so much we don't know.

Confusion About Distance Education

Teachers and families and districts are all confused for a variety of reasons.

- Every district and every state is dealing with this educational situation differently.
 - Some are going to online instruction.
 - Some are sending home packets of work
 - Some are not providing instruction.
- We don't know how long we are going to be out. We don't know whether days will have to be made up.
- We are struggling with how to provide services to students with significant disabilities who can't easily access online instruction.



Concern About Distance Education

Obviously there is concern from the virus, but there is also huge concern for our students. I have heard over and over from teachers these last 2 weeks that they are concerned for the physical and educational well being of their students. It is so very clear how dedicated teachers are and how attached we are to our students.

And they are concerned about how they are going to provide the type of instruction that their students receive in their classroom. For students who can do paper and pencil tasks or work on online activities (and have access) it might be an easier conversion. But for those who are working with students with severe disabilities who don't have learning readiness skills...it's not so easy.

So if this describes you...I want you to know above all...you are NOT alone. And I want you to know that you can do this. I've taught online in universities for years and years and it isn't as

Let's face it, I've never seen a group of people who can pivot and try to brainstorm how to help others more than teachers. Society has essentially said, we have no idea what to do with this, and teachers just keep saying...let's give this a try.

So let's get started

Why Not Send Work Home?

Let's start with three main options that districts seem to be adopting to send work. Now some districts are choosing not to send work home or have students enrolled in programs. Sometimes this seems to be because they have just closed school for the year and made arrangements not to worry about it. Others it may be because if they offer services in the form of online or distance learning to general education students, they are required to provide special education services to students.



What Does Access Mean in Distance Learning?

In addition, we have an issue with equal access. Yes part of that equal access is internet access and computer. But part of that access involves having a facilitator who assists the student with the access. Students in high school gen. Ed. classes for instance, might be able to do this on their own. A kindergartener or first grader, even without disabilities, cannot. And in this situation, these families did not choose to homeschool their child and there may not be a facilitator available. And particularly for our students in special education who need explicit instruction, that reduces their access. If their parents are healthcare workers and can't be home with them. If their parents have multiple children who need attention...and may be working...and so on. So there are lots of reasons that districts may choose to not send work for replacing school work home or engage in any kind of instructional activities.

Now mind you, there is really no way around this. The situation we are in at the moment requires that we close schools in order to keep people safe and reduce the load on our healthcare system. But it's all new for all of us and it isn't something most districts were really prepared for. Because of that it's going to take a bit to think it all through and make good decisions. So if you are a teacher or a parent, try to be patient with the district. They are likely trying to figure out what the federal government and the state want them to do and how to best implement anything that needs to be done in their community. It's not an easy job.

Enrichment Materials Approach

Another option that districts have taken is sending home what I call enrichment materials. These are materials that the students complete (online or on paper) to keep them engaged in instruction. Typically there isn't data or assessment completed with these activities. No grades are given. These are like the free packet I put out last week of scavenger hunts and games for students to play with their parents. They revolve around family activities and, in this case, they are designed to keep students engaged in language learning and interaction.



One of my biggest concerns for our students in all of this, particularly the students with autism, is that they will regress in the skills we have taught them. So enrichment materials that address those kinds of needs are things that I think are very important for our students. And again, it will require some family member or facilitator to be available. There are some online programs that we can share with families, many of which are being offered for free during this time. And that might help. Programs like [Headsprout](#) which is a reading program that is fun for the student but backed by ton of behavioral research are offering their platform free.

Distance Instruction

And finally, the third option for work during this time is distance instruction. Instruction, instead of enrichment, would mean it does take the place of school days, accommodations and modifications must be provided, IEPs have to be followed, and assessment of the work and grading have to be done.

Some districts are going to online or remote learning of some type. In some communities they are providing families with hotspots and laptops so they have access to online platforms. But remember that even with internet access, some students still may have limited access to a facilitator. And that may be tough for some of our students with severe disabilities or our early learners that we were just working on sitting in a chair.

So let me share a few thoughts about ways to create opportunities for different types of learning for students with disabilities. I think at this point we know about options like Headsprout and other online platforms who are generously offering their platforms to schools to use for free. If you have students who can access the internet and you have access to a platform like that, those are good options to include in your planning.

Places for Resources

Let me take just a minute to share a couple of resources as well. There are a ton of ideas out there and, if you are an educator, I encourage you to come join our [Free Facebook Group at specialeducatorsconnection.com](#). We have lots of educators sharing ideas and tools that can be used. In addition, it's a great time to come join the [Special Educator Academy](#) as I have



pivoted to putting together resources and tools for distance learning for staff. And I know that some of you may still be being paid (or paras might be) if you engage in professional development. My [free webinars are a great place to start](#) for that...and the Academy has 5 classes and more than 50 workshops to get you started with that--and we have district packages if they are interested. You can find out more about all of these in the show notes and in the blog post at autismclassroomresources.com/episode31.

Considerations in Planning Instruction

These ideas actually just came from the beginning of a workshop on Distance Learning for students with disabilities.

- Choose activities that can be easily adapted to the home environment. Activities that include materials they will have around the house. For instance, choose a science project that uses materials that are common household items rather than ones that require chemicals. The free scavenger hunts that I'll link to in this post do that. They are designed to be focusing on language in the student's everyday environment. You could add an assessment piece to them by having parents record the students' responses and send you the video.
- If you are doing enrichment activities, then focus on critical skills like language and communication for many of our students. These are the skills that will be the hardest to recoup when we can come back to school.
- If you send home more than a day of work at a time, and I'm guessing that you will, include a lesson plan with pacing for the family. Let them know it's flexible but give them some structure about what the expectations are. In the Home Enrichment Pack that is free in the resource library or my store, there is a link to a Google lesson calendar. It's definitely not a lesson plan, but if you are doing enrichment it will give you a start.
- If you have access to online platforms or apps that can provide instruction (e.g., TEACHTown, Unique), include them in the lessons as an activity so families can see how they will fit in.
- For young students, make task schedules that include play activities and send them home. Again, choose activities that families are likely to have.

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- If you are doing instruction then you need to have assessment of some kind. One easy way is to have families use their phone to video the student performing the task. Or if you are doing video conferencing, synchronous online learning, you could observe them from that.
 - You can also look for activities that will give you some type of work product. Consider taking one of the labels for work product (free in the resource library) and have family members complete that and attach it to the product to allow for data collection.
 - You may want to make a cheat sheet or a video of what the different levels of support might look like for them so they know what to record
 - If you are using something like [Unique](#) or News2You, use the benchmark testing to determine the student's progress

If you need more ideas, reach out in [our Facebook group](#). I'm trying to spend some time in there to help. And if you are a member of the [Special Educator Academy](#), reach out through the community or just email me. We are all here to help and you are not in this by yourself. And you don't have to have all the answers. None of us do.

Stay safe and stay healthy.