SUDDENLY ONLINE: SEVEN KEYS TO A SUCCESSFUL (SHORT TERM) TRANSITION TO REMOTE SCHOOLING

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Education in the time of coronavirus means, of course, remote education in some form or another. Like many educators who have been online for years, I once taught and served as an administrator in bricks and mortar classical schools and eventually made the transition to remote education (albeit for very different reasons) In this article, I outline seven keys to making that transition well, bearing in mind that the goal is a short-term transition that is as seamless as possible. So, as you and your school move forward through this uncertain time, I encourage you to remember . . .

FIRST, THAT YOU CAN DO THIS, BUT IT IS GOING TO TAKE PRACTICE.

By "this" I mean offering robust, classical, Trivium-driven teaching, especially in a live/synchronous virtual classroom – and yes, you can do this. But the how-hard-can-this-be attitude will lead inevitably to frustration and most likely to frustrated parents. The various providers of virtual classrooms (Adobe, Zoom, etc.) offer basic training. But learning the basic mechanics is only necessary, not sufficient. Teachers need to be afforded at least some time to practice the virtual room and give its main features a good test drive. I would recommend multiple opportunities for teachers to "teach" each other short sample lessons before loading the room with actual students and hoping it all goes well.

SECOND, CONSIDER USING SOME KIND OF LMS (LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM).

You will have assignments, quizzes, tests, reading materials, grades, and emails. You may choose to handle all of these discretely, having a separate "system" for each one, e.g., using Dropbox for handling documents, the already-existing school email system as the primary means of communication, etc. But there are LMS options that are either free or relatively affordable that handle all or nearly all of the asynchronous aspects of education in one system. The advantage of this kind of integrated technology is that you will likely want to consider keeping the system beyond your days of being a remote school.

THIRD, CONSIDER "FLIPPED CLASS-ROOM" SOLUTIONS.

Even with the various options for meeting in live online classrooms, you are likely facing significant scheduling questions and challenges. How often should our classes meet? And for how long? Should all of our students have live classes online or just the middle and upper school students? I cannot answer these questions for you, but I can suggest you consider the "flipped classroom" approach as part of your mix of possible solutions. The basic idea is to have the teacher record a video on a lesson or concept that requires

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primarily didactic instruction, which allows for the live/synchronous time for discussion of the recorded content. This makes for a more effective use of synchronous time and cuts down on the scheduling burden by allowing students to watch recorded content on their own time.

FOURTH, HEED CHARLOTTE MASON'S DICTUM, "NO TWADDLE!"

The temptation will be to give busy work—something for these students to do while being cooped up in their homes. Do not give in! Classical pedagogy is built upon the non-negotiable commitment to meaningful engagement of content that reinforces the fundamental tools of learning. This can be done online and resources are available (for one, Ambleside Online is a Charlotte Mason-oriented resource that my own family has found to be invaluable, especially for grammar-level children). Do more with less. Poems can be recited, memorized, rewritten (in cursive), analyzed, and imitated. Dynamic science labs can be accomplished through a well-positioned camera. For real-time Socratic discussions of great books, have each of your students turn on their webcams to capture the feel of the Harkness table.

FIFTH, THIS IS NOT BUSINESS AS USUAL, BUT NEITHER IS THIS A SALVAGING PROJECT.

Should you proceed with your plans for the rest of the year with as few changes as possible? I hesitate to make any kind of blanket statement (there is a world of a difference between a grammar-level literature class and, say, AP Physics), but I suspect in many cases—perhaps most cases—the goal of minimal change is probably unwise. But this should not lead you to think of the rest of the year as a kind of search and rescue mission. Your school year is not over and your plans are not dead. But you do need to step back from your original plans and look at them from a different

angle. Ask yourself, from what I have to work with—the books/materials that my students already have, the technologies our school will make available, etc.—what are the best things my students can and should be doing? As long as genuine learning is possible (and it is!), what you do from here on out to pursue that end will not be wasted.

SIXTH, DO NOT GIVE UP MEETING TOGETHER (VIRTUALLY).

With all the major adjustments your school will have to make, and the demands that those adjustments will entail, it will take a concentrated effort by the school's leadership to ensure the non-academic aspects of the life of the school do not become collateral damage. At a time when your students will already be cut off from the ordinary interactions they are used to and depend upon, some of which were occurring by way of your school (e.g., clubs, house system, athletics, etc.), failing to seek out alternative virtual means of continuing at least some of those opportunities for interaction would be unfortunate indeed.

LAST, GUARD AGAINST NEEDLESS AND UNHELPFUL LUDDITE TENDENCIES THAT EXIST EITHER IN PRACTICE OR IN POSTURE.

Again, you can do this; and again, it will take practice. But accomplishing all the points above will also require consistent creativity and adaptability from your entire faculty and staff. You will need energy and commitment from all involved, and Luddism will not help. Of course, there are various forms of technology that are either not helpful or downright problematic. But there is nothing anti-technological about classical pedagogy—quite the opposite, in fact. (And to be clear, this is no argument for or against such things as "ebooks" or laptops in the classroom—now is not the time.) The

key is to remember the goal and to keep it before you: we are equipping young men and women to be effective for Christ in the contemporary world. Technology is simply a means to that end; and so the real need is for connoisseurs of effective technology, not habitual technophobes. Recall Martin Luther's well-known use of the printing press to advance the Reformation (which is itself a reminder that the much loved "great book" available for mass-market publishing is a thing of technological beauty).

No one asked for this. But I do believe that God has equipped you, whether you are a teacher or an administrator (or both), to move forward with confidence, knowing that he is working all things together for the good of His bride. Press on in your good and faithful work.