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CPL Podcast: Class Dynamics & Wellbeing Online: Remote Teaching Special Part 111

Carly Boreland: Welcome to CPL podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation. I'm Carly Boreland, the Assistant Director of the CPL. Today I'm talking with Rosemary Henzell and we're talking about how you can get your class dynamics working for you in an online setting and how you can monitor and manage questions you might have about student wellbeing as well. This is the third in a three-part series about how you can try to manage our stay at home situations as we're moving further into them here in New South Wales. We're really pleased to have Rosemary here to help us along the way with what she's learned so far and what she wants to keep doing more of in her experience. Rosemary, welcome.

Rosemary Henzell: Hello.

Carly Boreland: Okay, Rosemary so this one is really important as it's the space I think where teachers do all of this amazing work that nobody pays much attention to, normally. It's not what you hear a lot about necessarily, but without it, nothing else works, is really the bread and butter of our pedagogy, I would say, and of our professional responsibility as a teacher. So when we move out of a classroom and we go online, I want to ask you why is focusing on the whole class still so important and not only on an individual student's learning but on their personal experience of this, very unusual setting as well.

Rosemary Henzell: Yeah, absolutely. Look, I think one of my driving beliefs as a teacher is that wellbeing comes before everything else. You can't teach a traumatised brain and we are all in a level of trauma right now, whether or not, you know, we're acknowledging it or really feeling the effects of that. This is a traumatic situation in a lot of ways, and that's particularly true for our young people and we do know that as teachers, we are such important figures in their lives and the separation from us for a lot of them is, is actually, it's huge. It's really meaningful and I think that before we can leap into activities online and assessments online and digital presentations, we need to know where our students are at and we need to be thinking about how they're feeling and helping them to cope with that, I guess, and to get through that. So that they can then come and engage with us in learning and hopefully continuing along with education. So I'm a huge believer in the importance of this and I think it is a challenge because I think so much of what we do in class normally is that noticing that really subtle noticing of that kid's not quite themselves, they're behaving in a slightly different way. They're very quiet today. They, they look thinner or they, you know, we notice those things so easily and we do want to keep up trying to stay in touch with yeah, with every student and the whole student.

Carly Boreland: Okay and so what's working for you with this and how do you keep the whole class together when they aren't, when they just aren't, how do you get them all to turn up? How do you find them when they're not where you expect them to be? How do you keep them maybe thriving is too much, how do you keep them interested and how do you keep them feeling special? When they're possibly home alone and, and we still need them to do their classwork.

Rosemary Henzell: Absolutely. Look, I mean, I will, I'll begin by saying that I'm working in a girl's school with fairly engaged students usually. So I'm not facing some of the issues that I know teachers are, that makes this whole situation even harder than it already is but we have significant wellbeing concerns at times and for a number of our students, so yeah, I think a few things, one of my big beliefs is that we are all teachers of wellbeing and that we want our students to see us and every other teacher, as a potential source of comfort or support should they need us. So I actually made the weekend before we came back to term, I made a video, at first, just for my classes about taking care of ourselves and I spoke about the importance of routine. I spoke about the importance of staying connected with other people and with ourselves and asking ourselves how we were feeling and monitoring the importance, you know, of movement and getting outside and things like that. Just the importance of asking for help. So I made this little video and we actually ended up posting it to the whole school and students, a lot of students watched it, some teachers watched it and it was really lovely to hear kind of the response from it because there was one little comment from a student that you said, "thank you so much for taking the time to make this", Because I think when we show them that we are there and we understand and that they matter to us, that's hugely meaningful, so any little actions we can do, sometimes it's just a message on our classroom or a little meme. Yeah, I've got this. There's one of my favourites is called "*The Encourage mint*" and it's just the leaf, oh, you know, a little mint leaf going, "I believe in you". It's kind of cute and you know, a bit, a bit quirky, but it's just saying to students, I'm here and it's going to be Okay and I think we do become a really important anchor figure in some ways. So lots of little affirmations. However, we can do that for our students, whatever platforms they're on, whatever resources they're engaging with, if we can find ways to, to show them that they're important to us and we're here and we want to know how they are, that is going to encourage them to come to class and to log on and to join in because they want to be, they want to be part of that and they want to reach, reach us through that.

Carly Boreland: Those links are something that you can find on the CPL website and the page that's connected to this episode, along with some more information about Rosemary and a host more episodes for CPL podcasts. Some of the other episodes we've talked about with Rosemary for this special series include what you can do to assess learning when you're working in an online environment, in all the forms that that might take. And also how you can get set up with your online teachings. So you can head to our website and you can subscribe to our podcast and you can find all of those extra tips there as well. As I was hearing you talk, I was thinking Rosemary that some of that stuff about positivity and encouraging messages in a normal classroom setting, a lot of that is just done with a smile, eye contact and a smile and a one on one, or, you know, a wink of acknowledgement of something. You can't do that so easily online because when you smile, you smile at everybody and unless you're really good at looking down the lens of the camera, which most people are not, then, you tend not to make that contact in the same kind of way.

I wanted to ask you as well about the dynamics between students. Some of the things that have occurred to me is that it could be fantastic and probably the typical situation is that a teacher is with a class that they already have and now they've moved that online. The benefits of that are that, you know, your students, you know, everybody, and you've got the relationships already and hopefully some good structures set up already that you can build upon. The downside, of course, is that you might have some dynamics in your class that are not working well at school, and they can be translated into an online environment, so there can be dominant personalities, there can be a sense of fearfulness about saying the wrong thing. I know that there can be a fear of hearing your own voice, in a different kind of way. I wondered how do you manage some of that? And what about trying to break a bad dynamic? Is there any chance of making things better or finding a different way or what do you think?

Rosemary Henzell: Yeah, look, I think it is really hard. I think this time round feels quite different in some ways, in terms of class dynamics for me, because we went into lockdown so early in the year, last year, and particularly for me my year seven class, we actually, we had a case of COVID. We were shut down very early and half my year seven class we're in 14 days quarantine before coming back to school for one day and then the whole state shut down. So I, I had an early taste of it, but, I also, I recognise it for those guys that had less than a month of high school and knowing each other before they disappeared online, some of them had even less than that because they were in quarantine. I think, I feel really fortunate this time that I've had more time to build the dynamics of my class and in some classes where the dynamics are really good, that is actually a real, a real form of strength. I'm really using that. So particularly I'm noticing from my year 12 and my year 11th, I've got really lovely dynamics in those classes and I'm using them in breakout rooms to make it feel normal. Because again, I do think as much as we can, we want to maintain routines that support them, and we want to normalise where we can because we know that other things are out of our control. So I think, yeah, working groups where they're positive groups and you can group them with people that, you know, they will feel good with. So like maybe in the actual classroom, you're

trying to break up a couple of groups and get people to work with different people. This might be a time to retreat back to the safety of, groups where they're their friends, but they're going to work okay together. Like they can be a bit silly, they can have a bit of fun.

So I dropped into one of my year nine breakout rooms where I'd let them pick, their own groups and then there are, there are a lovely class, so I wasn't too worried. It was an experiment. It was my first time trying that, but I dropped in on them because I wanted to ask a question, and they had all put, they'd all used a filter to put animal faces on themselves and they were all a different animal and they were doing the work, but they were also just animals in the breakout room and I kind of loved that. Like, I'm like, it's not distracting you. It's not a problem. There's laughter there's joy and you're connected and that's really important. I guess the flip side of that is where you have poor dynamics, or you have issues. Maybe there are students who just don't get along well or you know there are issues, if there's more serious issues in terms of bullying that can obviously be exacerbated, and you do really have to be careful of that.

I think we have to be really "with it" in terms of the potential for students to behave poorly in the online environment. It's really important for us to kind of scale ourselves up in what are the chat features and what are the security options and if we need to shut a student out because they're behaving inappropriately, do we know how to do that? Do we have the processes in place to make sure that our students are safe online and, and protected if need be? In terms of, can we, can we shift a bad dynamic? Like they could be potential I think depending on the situation, there might be the opportunity you know to, to reach, do small group work with those kids who just won't interact or engage in the larger class environment to have a chance to kind of just really quietly in that breakout room with a couple of them, do some work, build their confidence where no one else is watching because no one else can see, because that can be an issue for those students when they're in the whole classroom and if you're spending time with them, they can feel everyone's going to get to know that you're helping me, or they don't want that attention. Maybe it's an opportunity for us to do a bit of work there and build a bit of confidence.

Carly Boreland: Okay and again, it comes back to some of the things we've talked about in the other episodes about not losing sight of the importance of noticing, noticing everybody, finding where they are and checking in with them separately. Noticing who's not there and asking perhaps the rest of the class, does anyone know, can someone, you know, find them, and get them on here. We all know that students have amazing ways of finding their friends, despite all of our best intentions, they can usually get a hold of each other very fast and remind them that, "hey, we miss you and the teacher noticed you weren't here and come and join us".

Rosemary Henzell: Yeah. I think it goes a long way for a student to go, oh, you realised I wasn't there. I think those little things can actually make a massive difference. I think feeling important at this point is really crucial for students and, and feeling them realising that we, we are here for them and we do know them and we do notice, I think is really crucial.

Carly Boreland: Something that I've been aware of as a phenomenon around the world is that reporting of wellbeing concerns has really dropped off and it goes to the importance of teachers and the good work that they've always been doing that we've always been doing in that space. What are some tips you've got there for perhaps reminding each other as teachers, that those things still matter and, for making sure that we're checking in with families and with students and following up when someone's not around or when we think something might be a problem?

Rosemary Henzell: Yeah. I mean, I think a lot of this comes into school practice and whole school practice and hopefully all our schools have those in place already and have ways of managing and coordinating that. So I know that we use an engagement spreadsheet where teachers enter their data about whether students are not engaging or of only kind of popped in and out and were a bit worried and then we collate that and we can chase up students who maybe it's just our subject like maybe they're just, they've dropped out of English or that dropped out of drama that they're okay at other things and so once know that I can chase that up. Whereas there are, you know, other more serious conditions like students with conditions who we need to really yeah, kind of gather around and muster a lot of our forces there but yeah, I, I do think it does, it does require a whole-school approach to this one. We know that it's quite serious and we know that the consequences of us not noticing and us not chasing it up in good times. That's why I think it is really important to keep those regular records in some way so that you can see a pattern emerging very quickly and you can reach out because I do think that is more important than ever. It's always important, but yeah, particularly right now.

Carly Boreland: And in the, in the same way, that we want our class to stay connected to each other, we probably need to remind ourselves that we need to stay connected to our colleagues and all those conversations that you would usually have about a particular child in the staff room, where you ask someone, "Hey, do you know anything about, or what's going on?" or that still should happen and building in those structures for the teachers to chat.

Rosemary Henzell: Absolutely. Yeah. Look, I think if faculties don't already have a chat going, they should have one for all those reasons, you know, for the practicalities and the check-in for the, is anyone else having this problem, or the, you know, have you seen this student? But also just for that, the faculty joy. I am very fortunate to work in a faculty where we get along really well, and we bring each other a lot of joy on a day-to-day basis and we use our chat to do a bit of that and to, to keep that going. That's been really crucial for my engagement and my well-being as a teacher as well is to know that my colleagues are there and they're there regularly and we can share our experiences, share the pain, share the joy, and keep that going because we shouldn't underestimate that it's important for us as well, like how much we rely on each other and to build those structures in.

Carly Boreland: Some of the best times I think you can have as a teacher in a big staff room is when you're sitting together having a cup of tea or much-needed coffee and I suppose there's no reason you can't do that online as well.

Rosemary Henzell: Yeah. I think it's, anyway that you can just, that you can reach out and crack those jokes that you would usually make or, or share the pain, you know, or a hilarious, hilarious line at a student's piece of work that you do like, that's gold, it's nice to share it because they're going to get it.

Carly Boreland: Yes and have you thought of some ways to bring that joy to your classroom? I know with your year seven class; you did some fun things last time around.

Rosemary Henzell: Yeah. Look, I had a great time with my year sevens last year. Partly, you know, they were lovely class. They were very quirky. But as I said before, they struggled a lot because it was very new to them. They were very new to high school and they were really overwhelmed. So apart from just, you know, the stuff that we talked about in previous episodes, just cutting it down, reducing. We organised a Mad Hatter's tea party for them. It would be a couple of weeks in I think, and they, I could see they were really feeling it and they were feeling quite overwhelmed and I was like, okay, what can I do? And we had a wide reading period Friday afternoon, so I created an invitation, like a full, proper invitation and I sent it out to all of them in our classroom and everyone had to wear a silly hat or do something with their hair and we invited pets, and everyone had to have a drink of something, you know, and bring a book and we all got online in hats and wigs and crazy hairdos and, you know, with our little drink. We played *Kahoot* together, and it was just great, like it was such a lovely, it was such a lovely thing to do with them. I think those kinds of things are really important taking the time to do something silly together like doing, just dance together, playing a game like you're playing a *Kahoot*, putting a Kahoot up there and trying to play it, doing games together. If you can find a lesson, particularly towards the end of the day, if you know, they're tired or the end of the week where we're all tired and do something really silly because I think that even if it's not somehow directly linked to the learning, we're trying to do it is it is lightening their emotional load, which is going to allow them to continue learning. I think we need to give weight to the importance of that idea, that the things that we can do to kind of clear the slate, if you like, and, and get them re-energised and revived and ready to come back to learning. I think they're really valuable things to do.

Carly Boreland: Strikes me as a perfect opportunity to engage with families and I think schools have been doing that so much more in this environment than they might normally do, but there's no reason that lessons can't include more of family life and things like that as well.

Rosemary Henzell: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. I think any opportunity connect their worlds together, I think is a really, yeah, a really meaningful way to, to make this feel a bit better for them.

Carly Boreland: Rosemary, it sounds like your students are so lucky to have you and I know that there are thousands of teachers across New South Wales who are doing a fantastic job during this very difficult time and bringing that little bit of extra joy, but also noticing each and every one of our students and making sure that they're taken care of as best as we can. Thank you for sharing your insights and I'll let you get back to class.

Rosemary Henzell: Thank you so much. It's been great to talk.

Carly Boreland: You've been listening to CPL podcasts for the New South Wales Teachers Federation. I'm Carly Boreland, the Assistant Director of the CPL. I've been speaking Rosemary Henzell about how you can build up your class dynamics and take care of student wellbeing while teaching online and to find out more and to listen to further podcasts, you can visit our website at www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts.

Rosemary Henzell currently teaches English at Willoughby Girls High School. She completed her Master of Teaching in 2013, having spent seven years as an adult ESL teacher and TESOL trainer in Australia and Japan. Her MTeach Action Research Project investigated how to raise student confidence and agency in essay writing.

Rosemary is part of the Professional Learning Team and has presented to both staff and students on Growth Mindset and Habits of Mind.