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## **CPL Podcast: When Online Works: Possibilities Special Part 1**

**Host:** Carly Boreland

**With:** Jowen Hillyer

**Carly Boreland:** Welcome to CPL podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation I'm Carly Boreland and I'm the Assistant Director of the CPL. Today I'm talking with Jowen Hillyer, and this is a part of a two-part series where we're going to talk about the different settings that teachers can find themselves in for remote teaching experiences, at the moment, during our New South Wales coronavirus pandemic situation. The first part is going to be about what's possible when you're set up well for online delivery and when you have some infrastructure and technology and the social capital of students working in your advantage. Part two is going to look at Jowen's experiences of working in low SES and connected community settings and the possibilities for what might happen and what teachers might be able to do in those situations. Jowen, welcome.

**Jowen Hillyer:** Thank you Carly.

**Carly Boreland:** Now, Jowen, we're talking to you about these big and very different topics for a reason. Can you tell us a little bit about your background, firstly, and we do want to keep these short, but I think it is really important that we understand your experience and, and how that's influenced the things that you're talking about now?

**Jowen Hillyer:** Thanks Carly. Look, I have a really wide and varied experience in teaching. So I began my teaching in Southwest Sydney in a, what are those times I suppose, was termed, a disadvantaged school or a school in low socioeconomic community, and then moved to a central school as a head teacher, so out near in the Armadale area and from there, I was an Associate Lecturer at Sydney University and back to Southwest Sydney for a little while, and then to Taree as a connected community school and I'm currently the head teacher of English, HSIE and languages at Aurora College, which is basically School of the Air gone digital, so these are for year seven to 10 is for highly potential gifted students who are, who are essentially a selective school and then in year 11 and 12, for students who do not have that subject being offered in their school. I'm head of English, HSIE and languages at Aurora and 7 to 10 is a selective school essentially, but for rural and remote students and students living in the regions. So the students have to sit the selective schools test to be able to gain entry into that program but in year 11 and 12, it operates a little bit differently whereas if the school that they are hosted in, it does not offer the subject that they have and we do, then they can access it digitally that way. So essentially, it's really a School of the Air on digital in some ways and but for selective students. So it's a bit of an unusual niche, position that I'm in and a very interesting school.



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**Carly Boreland:** When you are set up to do this, what are some of the things that you can do that make the teaching work really well? So what are some things you've learned along the way in the current situation? There's lots of people like you who are finding themselves maybe for the first time or for the second time, because they tried it last year, but they might have a lot of regrets about what happened last year, or they might be just in a different time or a different cohort this time around, what have you learned from being in that online environment that could be really helpful for teachers who are, who were there for the first time?

**Jowen Hillyer:** I think what I've learned, well, a few things, but what I think is really great about the online environment is really about mastery learning and formative feedback. So even if I was back in a physical space and this is something, I'll talk about with my experiences last year, what I've took from the digital space and back into the classroom. But, but for now, I'll explain that, for mastery learning and formative tasks, when you're working in a digital space, you've got this immediate feedback, not two weeks later, and that is no fault of any teacher, I would collect books and randomly mark bits and pieces here and there. I know we're not meant to overload ourselves and mark every single piece of work. I don't mean that either. I mean that you can see what's going on so I can immediately step in and go, oh, that kid doesn't quite get this thing or this student's having trouble with structuring this, so I can see immediately where I then need to, you know, address something in the teaching for the whole cohort or where students might need individual intervention. So it's one of those things that I think really made me think about how important formative feedback is and about having checkpoints along the way of checking understanding. So, yeah, that's something that I think that I learned along the way, the importance of that sort of formative feedback in mastery learning rather than just barrelling ahead, like I probably would've always done, but you know, barrel ahead and got onto the next topic and the next idea rather than stopping for those checkpoints.

**Carly Boreland:** Or even I can imagine that, or I can remember if you, when you take a book home or you take a piece of writing home, the space between the students being engaged in the moment and the doing of it, and then your feedback, it changes the value and the quality of that feedback and how it's received, but perhaps if you can do it in the moment, then the advantages for the student as well as for you could be really great.

**Jowen Hillyer:** Because students sometimes feel like there is that wasted time as well. There's been a bit of time between, and that is like obviously the way that it works most of the time, but then they're forgotten even sometimes what they wrote, they don't know what they were doing. When with my year seven class online at the moment I would look at, for instance, Charles writing a little



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paragraph on something and I'll be able to see straight away. So I'm stopping them there. So they don't waste what they see is wasting hours and hours writing pages and pages of something that's entirely wrong. If it's caught early enough, I can say, oh no, they're on the wrong track and I can correct them, so I found that actually really, really valuable and I really bit of a gift in this situation for me, I think about maintaining, about maintaining relationships online was something that, is, it was very difficult, I think at first, I had mainly senior classes last year. So it was a bit different, but having a, a range of students understanding that you really need to, you know, connect before you, correct. I think that's a good little phrase and it's something that takes place in digital spaces as well, but it's more important in lots of ways in digital spaces, because tone is harder to read sometimes in that space, creating that sort of sense of community as well. So even in a digital space, you could have a little, you know, netiquette class rules, pre-recorded welcome messages to the lesson, little, little bits of pieces that make them feel as part of a community. So recreating the community of the classroom is not really possible, but you need to renegotiate. I think what the community looks like in a digital space and it is very different. I do have to say it is very different.

**Carly Boreland:** I'm really interested to ask you about the starting of a new class. I think most people who are in our current pandemic situation, they've got their own classes and now they've just had to move them online and that creates all kinds of challenges that are well discussed elsewhere, but there would absolutely be situations where teachers are picking up a class that they don't know, and that could be because of planned leave, it could be because of unplanned leave. The teacher might be a casual teacher or into a temporary block. There are a million reasons as this goes on for longer and longer that people are starting a new class for the first time online and I wanted to ask you, have you got any tips for how to get that set up?

**Jowen Hillyer:** So, I think so because this has happened to me this year, okay. So I had a teacher going on un-planned leave and I picked up a year 12 class, three quarters of the way through the course and a text I hadn't taught before for something I definitely didn't know and I had supervised other people teaching it and I'd done it myself in high school. I knew the text, but I hadn't taught it in this particular module. So that was the first thing was gathering those sorts of resources, but actually creating a collegial sort of environment with those students, had to be quite quick because we are working towards the HSC. So what I did there was really create this sense of security by having a structure to every lesson that was going to be the same, so very much the same way you do it in a classroom. So having a bit of a do now activity and then a bit of banter. So I'd have a whiteboard or a jam board going where they'd be putting their opinions or ideas about something. So getting discussion going pretty early on, because then you get to have that discussion with them, you get to know them a little bit better, but you're still focused on curriculum. So starting with a bit of a do now activity or a stimulus quote or idea, then a bit of banter and discussion about that.



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Doing some surveys, I would put up little surveys in our Microsoft teams of what they were, how they were feeling, what they wanted to study, what they were interested in, what was their stressors, those sorts of things, so that I'm getting a really big picture relatively quickly of that class and I've got almost like triangulating data really that I have this conversation going and I've got a jam board going and I've got a form going. So a couple of those things, I am always start all of my lessons when I pick up some, a class with what I wish my teacher knew about me, borrowing from primary pedagogy, really of just saying, what do I need to know about you? And so when students give me those answers, I very, very quickly can figure out what they don't think that they're particularly good at that they need to work on what their personal interests are and it's a one quick moment for in class five minutes work that you all of a sudden have a lot of data about them. I do a lot of, you know, sort of silly things, probably like little emoji check-ins and you know, brain break games that we do. So even with year seven, for instance, especially if you picked up a young group, really quiet, halfway through the year or as a casual, doing little games in the middle of the lesson, okay, you've got legitimately three minutes, find me something black, something texted and something, they said, bring it back. So they're moving around, and they bring it back in and they have to talk about what they have. So then you still getting them to talk to each other because that's another barrier to being a new teacher in a class that you don't know very well, is that they're very reluctant to talk to you. So it has to be small, low stakes and, and fun.

**Carly Boreland:** And lots of interaction from the students.

**Jowen Hillyer:** Yeah, absolutely. But that if the interaction is something that's really high stakes or something where they're being put on the spot to answer a question about a novel or something, they are not going to do that and I'm in a gifted environment now and even then, they would rather type in a chat than they will to speak. So to get them to talk to each other and interact, I know that there are some issues at the moment around, around using breakout rooms for discussions that we can't do that because they're at home, but in my situation, they're in a school being supervised, working online. So we do use some breakout rooms quite often, but also getting into collaborate on Google docs or on Google slides or on the MS equivalent. That's another thing you're still seeing them in class, but you're also contributing and seeing them all collaborate together. So I found that that was, also takes the heat out of it a little bit, if that distance between, putting them on the spot and making them speak but yet still they're communicating. So giving lots of different avenues for communication. A lot of the things that we use as welfare check-ins in the classroom can work equally well in the digital classroom and I played around with this idea of, I used to do a jellybean personality test, and it's just something you can just get online that you ask kids, if physically in the classroom, we usually pick a jellybean that they thought suited their personality and then you read out loud what the personality supposed to be according to this jellybean personality test and it's



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quite silly and fun. Like if you've got green stand up and we need to clap you because green people like recognition, like it's just silly things like that, but they always get a bit of a laugh. It takes a really short period of time. Now, if you're doing it in a digital space, you just have a pictures here, you know, seven different jellybean colours, pick one and say, why you think, why you think it represents you and then you read them the jelly bean tests. So a lot of those sorts of little fun games they're short, but they get them talking, they get them, them interacting with each other and maybe it takes a little bit of the heat off because they feel a little bit of pressure trying to get things done sometimes in a, in a different space.

**Carly Boreland:** And that's an important insight for us as well, because I can imagine when you pick up a class, especially if it's like year 11 or year 12, at this late stage of the year, you might feel like what you need to do is show your credibility of the subject and that you know, that you can get lots of information across to them, but that could really stifle the progress down the track by the sound of it.

**Jowen Hillyer:** Yes. Let me tell you, so this is a little bit of an anecdote there, but when I picked up this class and we're doing Shakespeare, we're doing Henry 1V Part One so it was a good place to just step into somebody's shoes. So I gathered obviously resources from lots of friends and lots of people who had taught it and lots of help came to me in that moment. So that was wonderful. But what I started to look at then instead of the content was the pedagogy. How can I put this across to these students in a way that makes them become really engaged with it really quite quickly? So I did some unusual things of making rewrite Henry 1V as a schoolyard drama and I gave them all of the different characters who they would be in the school yard and we had some pretty hilarious, but really could not be published because they were way too close to truth and they said that people in their schools would recognise them, but it was really funny and some of the students who hardly ever did, hardly ever engaged and struggled with this play said that "I totally understand this now I've put this into my own context or, you know, spinning the wheel and saying, what, what, hair colour would this person have in real life? What shoes would they pick and why?" Like silly little games like that even to start lessons, got them really thinking in a deep and engaging way about the play, not giving them here's seven different pages from it, a study guide, read it and annotate it. There is no way that they would have understood it in such a deep way had they have done something that was me showing my knowledge and yes, I know the play, yes I could explain all of these things to them, but they don't need a lecture. They need to engage with material, which they won't do. They have enough zoom, lecture, sorts of things, they actually need to get interactive if the digital space is going to work effectively.



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**Carly Boreland:** Okay. So just like in the classroom, it's not about us as the teacher, it's about our students. And even when you have all the advantages of digital media that are working well, and students who are very capable, the importance still needs to be on the pedagogy and the relationships just like it would be in a classroom and building that before you can get into any kinds of serious learning.

**Jowen Hillyer:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Carly Boreland:** And is there any other final thoughts that you wanted to add?

**Jowen Hillyer:** Yeah, I think that, that sort of group accountability needs to happen as well, that you need to have that interdependence of goal, you're not working in isolation, just all on the screen together. So that's why there needs to be those sorts of opportunities for them to collaborate in lots of different ways, because otherwise you end up having 15 faces on the screen who were just working on a document to the side.

**Carly Boreland:** Okay, Jowen, thanks so much for sharing what you've learned about digital teaching and working in fully online settings. I'm Carly Boreland and I'm the Assistant Director of the CPL. And I've been speaking with Jowen Hillyer about her experiences in the online environment to find out more and to listen to further podcasts, you can visit our website [cpl.asn.au/podcasts](http://cpl.asn.au/podcasts)

*Jowen Hillyer* is currently Head Teacher of English, HSIE and languages at Aurora College, the Department of Education's first selective virtual school for rural and remote students (7-10) and remote students in Stage 6.

Jowen has been a teacher, head teacher and teacher educator for 25 years, with experience in both rural and disadvantaged public schools, as well as 3 years as an Associate Lecturer at The University of Sydney.

In her current role Jowen leads a large, diverse faculty situated all over the state in new approaches, innovation, and student engagement. Her research interests are centred on project-based learning, boy's writing in the middle years and mentoring programs for beginning English teachers.