

# Teaching and Learning During COVID-19: An Interview with Evelyn Lauer

**Rafael Otto:** [00:00:00] Welcome to The Early Link Podcast. I'm your host, Rafael Otto. As usual, you can catch us on the airwaves on 99.1 FM in Portland on Sundays at 4:30 PM or subscribe and listen wherever you find your podcasts. Today, I'm speaking with Evelyn Lauer, who is based in Chicago and is a writer, high school English teacher, and most recently host of the podcast called Beyond the Bell.

Just last October, she set out to talk with teachers about the struggles of teaching during a global pandemic and has heard lots of great stories about how education has been flipped on its head for better or worse. Evelyn, welcome to the podcast.

**Evelyn Lauer:** [00:00:34] Thank you so much for having me. It's so nice being on the other side of this.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:00:39] Yeah, it's great to be talking with a fellow interviewer. Well, I'm hoping you can share some stories about what you've been learning from teachers as you've been talking with people all over the country. And if at first, could you just tell me about your podcast and why you got started?

**Evelyn Lauer:** [00:00:57] Sure. So, as you mentioned, it's called Beyond the Bell and I guess my kind of idea what the title was... we're really, especially from the spring and fall, we were all, most of us teaching in nontraditional settings. So not really in a traditional classroom. Most of us were teaching via Zoom or Google Meets or Microsoft Teams or something like that.

And that's so different than what most educators are used to. And one of the standards of school is the idea of the "bell," and we're now "beyond the bell." It's like everything that's happening outside of the traditional classroom. So that was kind of the idea for it. But really I wanted to focus on how teachers are teaching during the pandemic and the effects of that, because like everything else during all of this, our lives have had to change so much and no one ever expected that you could actually teach from home.

Many of us have been doing that for so long that now we're transitioning back into the classroom and trying to do both at the same time. And so it's just the idea of like, how did the pandemic affect education and teaching and to see, teachers' stories about their experiences and to sort of document that was my idea.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:02:17] And we've just passed the one-year mark for when things shut down. So, tell me, what are some of the stories that stand out when you're talking to teachers about what this transition has been like and what they've had to go through to make the classrooms really come alive for their students?

**Evelyn Lauer:** [00:02:33] Yeah. I mean, most of the educators that I've talked with are secondary school educators. And I think that at the secondary level, our experiences with teaching during COVID have been perhaps different than some elementary school teachers.

At the high school level, we're dealing with an extreme lack of engagement from the perspective of.. the students turn their cameras off.

So most of the day when we're teaching on Zoom, like I teach via Zoom, students' cameras are turned off. And so the number one thing that I've heard over and over again, with all of the teachers that I've spoken with on the podcast, is this idea of engagement. So what does engagement look like when you can't see students' faces. Everyone feels a real loss about that, for sure.

But also has made us really kind of think about: even when students are in our classroom, they're physically present, how engaged are they really? And how do you measure engagement? Because we have all had students who are physically there but really aren't there. And so having to find new ways to engage students using different technology or the use of the chat. So, maybe they're engaged in writing in a chat box, but not engaged by unmuting themselves or showing their faces on camera. So I would say the engagement piece is probably the number one thing that I hear educators talk about. And then versus like, when I have spoken with primary school or middle school teachers, the engagement piece seems to be higher. Meaning that they're more accustomed to seeing their students' faces. And the students seem to sort of want to share their whole days, maybe overshare, like sharing what they had for lunch, can I go to the bathroom, and all that kind of management that's probably happening. So it seems like there's extremes based on the age of the students that teachers teach.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:04:37] There seems to be a shift as kids get a little bit older, they move through fourth, fifth grade, start to get into middle school and then something changes there, it seems like, in how kids want to be seen on camera or how they're engaging online. What have you heard about that?

**Evelyn Lauer:** [00:04:53] Yeah. I mean, it seems like there is an anxiety piece I think, or an embarrassment, and maybe it's because their face is like back at them. And I'm sure adults feel it too, like we've all been on Zoom more now than we ever have,

**Rafael Otto:** [00:05:07] Zoom fatigue is real.

**Evelyn Lauer:** [00:05:09] Yeah, exactly. It's very real. I think too, it's also a peer pressure thing. Students don't want to be like the kid that has their camera on, or one of the few kids that has your camera on almost like the kid who has the camera on is like the teacher's pet or something like that.

And so I do think a lot of it is peer pressure, even though yes, there are some real technical reasons why students have their cameras off... due to WiFi issues or if they have their cameras on, they can't do anything else in terms of streaming or they can't unmute. Or I do think there's some cases of students being embarrassed about their surroundings in terms of their home life or the home background noise. If there's many other people living with them and there's grandma and grandpa, and mom and dad, and whoever in the kitchen.

And so, I do understand why as students get older, there's a little bit more consciousness of their environment and what's going on around them. I do also feel that, teachers also, we

kind of laugh about it because it's the sense of... this is this generation that is constantly taking selfies and putting them out on social media and taking like Snapchat pictures and sending them to their friends yet, they don't want to show their camera on screen. So there's a little bit of irony in that for us adults of like, we don't get it. You guys are always showing yourselves to the world, but that's controlled, they're like controlling it.

And I think there's like this a little bit of fear or panic of like, what is someone going to say about me if they're seeing me in my setting or, I know my high school students are literally at an 8:00 AM class they're still in bed. They're probably taking the call from bed. I have students that are taking the call from work. So they're actually trying to work and go to school at the same time. And they're like multitasking. And so they're not going to put their camera on because they don't want me to know that they're at McDonald's serving french fries or whatever. So there's some of that going on too at the high school level.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:07:19] Teaching is hard. No matter how it's done. In person is difficult, distance learning has been difficult. We weren't really sure it could be done. It's been done now for just about a year, but hybrid.. you've talked about this being really the most difficult option.

Can you say more about that and what those environments have been like?

**Evelyn Lauer:** [00:07:39] Yeah. So I'm in my third week of hybrid. And honestly, today, I had one bright moment and I'm riding a high from it still because I have so little engagement online and I had five. No, I think. Four students in the classroom today and the rest are online. So I might have 20 students online and four kids in the classroom.

So when I say hybrid, I'm saying it's not even half and half; it's leaning way more towards the remote side. And that's pretty much the case with all of my classes. Like I might have four students, some days I only have one student. And so your energy is really still going online. And trying to juggle that is very difficult because you have real bodies in the room that you want to make connections with. But you have the majority of the students still online, but they're black boxes. I can't see their faces. But the kids in front of me, even though they have masks on, I can see their faces.

And that beautiful moment happened today. I teach a digital storytelling class and the students had to turn in videos and we were watching some of the videos. And I showed this video of the student's "a day in the life" video. So they had to show us what a day in their life looks like. And at the end of showing the kids video, and the kid was in the classroom but everybody was watching it, the kids in the classroom clapped, like applauded it. And then I say, "Oh my God, the kids in the classroom are clapping." I literally said it out loud to make sure the kids at home knew what was going on because they could probably hear the clapping, but not see it.

And it was kind of this beautiful moment that reminded me of like what real school used to be like when you had a classroom with 30 kids and like, everybody likes something and they would clap and their engagement. And I was like, wow, it just sort of happened naturally and organically, but that's kind of what has been missing from remote.

And this was the first instance in hybrid that it almost felt real, because there was that sort of energy component. Um, it was kind of a neat moment for me and I was like, okay, now how do I ride this into the next class?

But the hybrid is difficult or has been a challenge because, and I'm sure it's a challenge even when you have more kids in the classroom, because it's a constant tug of war of the kids at home need attention, but the kids in the classroom need attention. And then there's the tech element layered on it. Like, making sure everybody can hear each other. And we have like fancy technology but sometimes it doesn't work and making sure all the audio is right. And sometimes the kids at home can't hear and the kids at school can, and it's a lot of juggling of things we've never had to worry about before.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:10:37] Right, do you feel like... I mean at some point, we'll go back to having classes all in person. But do you think that there will be room for ongoing distance learning or hybrid in some ways for a subset of students?

**Evelyn Lauer:** [00:10:53] I think, yes. I think some school districts, I think mine in particular is probably really going to lean toward that option of like having that option there. I would hope we would rather have remote only sections. Meaning, a teacher that is teaching... well they might be teaching in the school building, but teaching a group of students that are all remote, instead of the hybrid fashion. Unless it's like an extreme case that it's one student in a room who's at home for medical reasons or something and they could like log in and listen, but to feel a part of something still... I really... In order for the teacher to do what they do best, which there's a magic to it, can not happen... some of the magic is lost in the, the two different worlds. Trying to merge those two worlds is really hard and I feel like...if there were five kids at home and 25 kids in the room, those five kids are going to be left out in some of it, if they're not in the room.

I think the goal should be to get kids back in the school. But I think we've learned a lot about technology and about distance learning for those extreme cases. And I think more schools should offer remote options. For students that do well in that setting or need to out of necessity, but not forcing the teacher to be hybrid. Does that make sense... what I'm suggesting?

**Rafael Otto:** [00:12:42] That makes sense. And I'm curious if you think about that, you know, cause I know you're teaching high school, but do you feel like those kinds of options could be available all the way down to kindergarten?

**Evelyn Lauer:** [00:12:53] Yeah. I mean, I think so. Obviously at the kindergarten level, the social emotional piece is so important in terms of engaging with other students, other kids, right? But, I think that if I could see a student that needs to be at home for some reason... medical reason. If there was a remote kind of section where they could learn the basic skills in terms of reading and math, and letters and all that kind of stuff. I mean, clearly a lot of primary school teachers across the country have had to teach this age group now via Google Meets or whatever. So, they're figuring it out. They can do it. Kids are learning. Maybe it's not the best environment for them to learn, but some kids are doing really well that way. I have a hard time as a parent thinking about wanting to have my kindergartener online. If

that makes sense. Like as a parent, I'm like, why would somebody want to choose that option?

At the high school level or middle school level there's a little bit more things that might be going on with a student, in terms of social emotional needs or medical needs or mental health needs, that might necessitate a kid needing to be at home.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:14:22] Yeah, I know. My third grader is pretty excited about going back. They're going to be going back into a hybrid model in a few weeks here in Oregon. My middle schooler, less so. Less excited about that opportunity at the moment. How long have you been doing hybrid where you are?

**Evelyn Lauer:** [00:14:40] So I'm in my third week of teaching it myself.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:14:44] Okay. Okay.

So it's still relatively new.

**Evelyn Lauer:** [00:14:47] It's very new. And I think it really depends on what... like my own children, I have a third grader and a sixth grader and they're in a hybrid model as well. But half of the kids are back in the classroom at once. So my third grader, there's like 15 kids in the classroom and then the rest are online. To me, that's 15 kids in the classroom is a whole different feel than having two kids in the classroom, which is what I'm dealing with at the high school level.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:15:19] Right. So in this few weeks, what have you learned? Do you have advice for other teachers, like given what you've learned in the past few weeks going hybrid, what would you suggest for other teachers?

**Evelyn Lauer:** [00:15:32] Um, I need the advice. Um, (laughs) I'm still so new at it. I mean... the best part about it, no matter what, is seeing the faces in the room. So I guess my main advice is there are teachers who are very hesitant, like this isn't worth it, what's the risk, is the reward worth the risk? I would say it is, from the perspective of getting to see actual bodies and actual faces in a room in the classroom is energizing. You will get more energy off of just being in the physical space than you ever have teaching on the computer. That in itself has been very rewarding. The actual teaching component.. I don't feel like I'm doing very much differently than I was when I was teaching remotely because of my number situation.

I mean, just go easy on yourself. And I keep telling myself, there's only two months left in the school year, so I can do anything for two months. I'll figure this out and just when I have it semi figured out, it'll be summer and then God knows what's going to happen in the fall so...

But it is good being back in the building and just like feeling like a teacher again, from that perspective.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:16:54] You talked about the social emotional component a little bit, and I'm hoping you can say a little bit more because one of the things that you've talked about is

that the education system, like, we're really going to have to be dealing with the social emotional impact on kids. Not just for a few months, but for a while, probably for years to come, about their experiences in this pandemic. Can you say more about that? And maybe what you've heard from other teachers as well?

**Evelyn Lauer:** [00:17:23] Yeah. I mean, I just think to not be in a physical school for over a year for some of our students across the country, and not have all the support that happens in public schools, and to not have the extracurricular activities and the clubs and the sports and just the engagement that happens in the hallways.. I just think that that is a detriment to all of us and to the students and the kids especially. I think we are going to have students in the fall who, because they've been remote learning and doing it successfully, whatever that means for them, and kids with anxiety or severe social anxiety already are going to be like, I really don't want to go back to school. I'm doing okay. Like I'm getting As and Bs this way and I don't really want to deal with all the social pressures. And they already had maybe a 504 plan for anxiety and social anxiety. I've had parents tell me in conferences "My daughter loves this kind of thing." So I think there's going to be parents maybe that ask schools to be like, "Can we keep doing remote because it's working for my son or daughter."

So, then those are conversations that are going to have to be had. And then students that do come back, who just struggle with interaction with other kids, not wanting to see some of their peers because those interactions might be awkward. And then you have the whole mask thing and worrying about COVID on top of it.

And then that even goes for the younger grades of the young children who haven't been around other kids and who have really forgotten what it's like to be in school. So, sitting still at a desk - if that's the case - interacting with other kids, sharing, leaving mom and dad during like transitions. I mean, which are already hard with some of the kindergarten preschool ages of like drop-offs, like kids not wanting to go because they're so used to being at home with their parents.

Separation anxiety, like anxiety in general, I think is going to be something that schools we're probably going to have more and more 504 diagnoses with anxiety and the next year than ever before. And there's already so many.

Some of my colleagues and I were talking this weekend of like, when teachers are making accommodations across the board already, does the 504 kind of become null and void? Meaning like, what's the point of the diagnosis from the school's perspective if the accommodations don't matter because we're accommodating for everybody for the same reason. Does that make sense? So, just the sense of like, is it even going to be a thing because everybody's going to have this anxiety with just transitioning back to normal life. And I think that's for adults too. Like it's all very anxious for a lot of people and everyone's gonna react in different ways. And not everyone's going to transition back, of like, "Oh, yay... this is awesome! I get to be around hundreds of people, again."

**Rafael Otto:** [00:20:55] Talk a little bit about that transition, I guess, and also thinking about what this has been like the blurred lines between work and home. I know you've talked to

some teachers who also have kids. And so they're in this conundrum constantly about how to be an effective teacher and how to be an effective parent with their kids at home.

There are some upsides to having everything happen all in one place. I get to see my kids a lot more during the week, (chuckles) but there are also a lot of downsides and having a lack of separation between your workplace and your home environment can be really problematic. What are you hearing?

**Evelyn Lauer:** [00:21:31] Yeah. I mean, I think that's been a challenge for all parents who are working remotely right now. Teachers in particular just with the type of job that we have. We're not just in a meeting where we can turn our cameras off and on mute and like no one's going to know we're gone, right? If we disappear from the camera for a minute, all the students are gonna be like, what's going on?

So, one of my most recent episodes on the podcast I interviewed four working moms, who are also teachers and with young children, and all of them talked about this blurred line and how difficult it is and how... you know, one mom talked about how she has a three-year-old son who really is struggling with separation anxiety right now. So every time she walks into her office to teach, her son is screaming for her on the other side. And so she's trying to teach her class, but she can hear her son screaming on the other side of the wall, and how difficult that is for her to try and hold both places at once. You know, the usual things. I've had to deal with it too. Kids throwing tantrums, needing something coming in while you're in the middle of class asking for food, a snack, "mommy, I need this," young kids not necessarily understanding or respecting the space of like mommy's in her office right now because I mean, it's their home.

So, I think that's really been hard for teachers who also have their kids at home because they feel constantly torn and pulled between being a mother and or being a parent and being a teacher. On the plus side, like you mentioned, I think especially teachers with a little bit older kids who are a little bit more self-sufficient, and I'm in this boat as well, being able to have your own children at home, it's been nice to kind of be more involved in their education.

And I know from the teacher's perspective, what's funny.. the kindergarten teacher I interviewed on my podcast talked about the other side of that and how she was like all the parents know everything I'm doing. So they're hearing everything I'm saying, they're literally like.. I see the parent come into the zoom call to like help with something. She said that's very challenging as a teacher because the parents are in her business 24/7 and, like, have an opinion on everything. I don't see that as much at my level, but I will say that parents are more involved as a whole, I've noticed, with their kids' education than ever before because they're hearing bits and pieces of it.

They walk by on the way to get coffee and they hear "Oh, what are you doing in math class or whatever." So it's been interesting as a parent and as a teacher, but I did think from the kindergarten teacher's perspective, like, yeah, I bet! Because those kids need help even like logging into their computer in the morning. They're probably sitting at the kitchen table with their iPad or whatever, and the mom is probably sitting right next to them. So..

**Rafael Otto:** [00:24:40] If you look back, you think about this past year, do you feel like there's anything that we could have done differently or our systems could have done differently? And I know things have varied all over the country, there's been different approaches from state to state. So it's, not like there's just one approach to take a look at, but do you feel like some things could have been done differently to handle the way we've approached teaching and learning during the pandemic?

**Evelyn Lauer:** [00:25:07] I mean in general I think school.. individual school systems and teachers have done an amazing job of just figuring it all out. Right? So like the fact that we all learn different technology and we have been able to transition I think is pretty incredible if you think about it. I mean, I guess my hope more is like, I hope some of the conversations that we've been having and the way that we use technology to aid the classroom and engage students doesn't disappear. So one of the things that, like, conversations that are happening in our district, this idea of... people think that teaching means standing in front of a classroom and handing out papers. And if I'm not physically exchanging papers with the students and having them fill out a worksheet, then I'm not teaching. So can we let go of some of that and are some of these new tools that we've learned, like Pear Deck for example, can we continue to use these tools to engage kids and that doesn't get lost when we go back in the classroom.

So that's, like, kind of my hope is like, what can we take the good from what we've learned from all this? And like, it doesn't disappear. Moving into the future in terms of what schools could have done differently in general..I still feel like I'm too much in the thick of it to like, answer that truthfully in terms of on a whole scale level. I think that this is the right time in education to make systemic change. And if we're not -at the state level, the district level and individual school level and individual teacher level - if you're not making some kind of systemic shift in the way that you think about education, I think you've missed the boat. This is the opportunity to really shake things up and if you just go back to how things were a year and a half ago, I think we're making a mistake. That's the mistake.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:27:16] The pandemic as a driver for change, is it?

**Evelyn Lauer:** [00:27:19] Yes. Yes.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:27:22] Will it allow us to make some of those real systemic changes, you think?

**Evelyn Lauer:** [00:27:27] I don't know. I was more hopeful six months ago. I'm a little bit less hopeful as we start to reopen and I start hearing conversations. I would hope, but people also like to go back to the way things were because it feels safe and comforting. And to me, if schools aren't really looking at how you... we've all had a blow up our schedules. The other main thing of all the teachers I've talked to: every single school district has a different crazy schedule, okay? Like crazy schedules. They've all reinvented the wheel. And now we're just going to go back to the same old schedule we had before that at some schools maybe wasn't working?



We need to rethink the school day and we need to rethink how students are spending their time. What's important? That's the other thing that so many teachers talked about, is we've had to rethink our curriculum and narrow it down to the essential skills. And that's what I think all schools need to do.

What is essential? What do we want kids to come out of our learning environment knowing? I think there needs to be more of a focus on social emotional, I think there needs to be more hands-on learning. I'm all about project-based learning. I want to see more excitement like that instead of just okay, let's go back to handing out worksheets.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:28:54] Well, let's hope that what we've learned in this past year will actually provide some examples for how to change things for kids and families in our school systems.

**Evelyn Lauer:** [00:29:02] Yeah, I hope so.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:29:05] Well, Evelyn, I wanted to thank you for your time today. It's been great to have you on the podcast

**Evelyn Lauer:** [00:29:11] Thanks for having me. It's been fun.

**Rafael Otto:** [00:29:13] And if you're listening today, please check out Beyond the Bell, hosted by Evelyn Lauer. You can find it wherever you listen to your podcasts.