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LEARNING FROM MRS. PANDA

The pandemic forced educators to learn new tricks and created at least one innovation that is here to stay

BY SAMANTHA DUNN

They say necessity is the mother of invention. In this case, it's the mother of a talking cartoon named Mrs. Panda.

But let's back up a little.

A highly regarded research professor in education at UC Riverside, Linda Ventriglia-Navarrette, Ph.D., directs Project

Adalente Moving Forward, an early childhood literacy initiative that develops a curriculum called "ABC Rule of 3," aimed at leveling the achievement gap for English learners. It's a huge area of need because estimates show that by 2025 English language learners will make up 25% of the school population nationally.

Ventriglia-Navarrette's program, which was initially launched in the Moreno Valley but now serves students across seven states, has received many laurels and millions of dollars in federal grants. In 2019, a yearlong randomized study with 339 students in 16 kindergarten classrooms from nine different schools demonstrated



Students at Las Palmitas Elementary School practice the Rule of 3.

the Rule of 3's effectiveness: 73.9% of English learners given the intervention met national benchmarks, compared to only 6.9% in the control group.

Yet all of this success didn't mean much when the pandemic hit.

When the lockdowns swept the nation, Ventriglia-Navarrette, like millions of educators nationwide, suddenly had to find a way – and fast – to translate a program designed for in-person instruction into an online experience.

“Online experience.” That sounds too neat and contained. What that really meant was finding a way to grab the attention of wiggly 4- and 5-year-olds who were now stuck at home in front of a computer screen.

Then, assuming you could get their attention, teach them foundational skills like the sound and shapes of letters – only one of the many vital foundational skills they must have. “If you can get past those grades successfully and, you know, accelerate, then you don't have to remediate later,”



PHOTOS BY SANDRA BALTAZAR MARTÍNEZ, UCR

Teacher Gloria Perez, in March 2020, demonstrates the Rule of 3 at Las Palmitas Elementary in Thermal.

Ventriglia-Navarrette explains.

The learning curve for online was, for many, like trying to get a 747 off the ground with no runway. Not only were teachers trying to figure out how best to teach via online, but parents also were thrust into the position of facilitating that online teaching.

So what to do? How to get her program online in a way that would reach students and make it easier for teachers and parents?

Her first thought was to videotape really expert, experienced educators teaching the program. Great idea!

Except for one problem: Kids soon lost interest in the videotaped lessons, their attention wandering.

“For teachers, the difference between online and on-ground is that face to face you have to sit

there and listen. Online, you can turn me off anytime you feel like it, right?” says Ventriglia-Navarrette. “The teachers, they did a good job, but the young kids were not, you know, engaged, to tell you the absolute truth.”

Argh. The clock was ticking, opportunities to learn crucial, fundamental skills being lost.

Then, one of her former students – now a teacher – happened to mention that he had been reading an article about the effectiveness of what in education lingo is called “animated pedagogical agents.” In other words, cartoon characters teaching lessons.

That gave Ventriglia-Navarrette an idea. In some of the children's books she had authored, she'd created a character named Mrs. Panda who was pretty, patient and



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– LINDA VENTRIGLIA-NAVARRETTE, PH.D., PROFESSOR IN EDUCATION AT UC RIVERSIDE

smart: “So I thought to myself, well maybe I can do it, take Mrs. Panda out of the books and use her.”

So she hired an animator and got to work. But honestly? She struggled.

“I thought I could write it. I’ve written a lot of curriculum and teacher’s manuals, you know,” says the award-winning researcher. “But the animator said to me, ‘Look, this is no good. You can’t write a teacher’s manual. You’ve got to write a movie script.’ I had never done that before, and I was like kind of taken aback when he said that to me. He said, ‘You’ve got to develop her like she’s a person, like you’re writing a movie and you’re giving her the lines to say. You’ve got to make or have passion, a character with motivation, all of those things that we do when we write scripts.’”

So this seasoned educator – Claremont College- and Harvard-educated, and an author of numerous academic books about literacy and language development – found herself in the role of student, having to learn an entirely new skill while blending in the pedagogy she knew so well.

“I mean, now I know what a script writer feels like because as you’re doing it you have to put yourself in a totally different mode,” she says. “I had to kind of make myself be Mrs. Panda. What would I do if I was teaching this lesson? How would I reinforce it?”

But learn she did. Ventriglia-Navarrette adapted the Rule of 3 by adding imaginative PowerPoints to enrich children’s vocabulary, animated phonics charts, and catchy songs. Mrs. Panda also offers lots of empowering catch phrases like “Kiss your smart brain!” – details that kids seem to love.

The end result turned out better than Ventriglia-Navarrette could have imagined. She says teachers report they can use the structured



Dr. Linda Ventriglia-Navarrette

PHOTO COURTESY DR. LINDA VENTRIGLIA-NAVARRETTE

program to accelerate learning and differentiate instruction. Students who need the remediation can watch the Mrs. Panda lesson over and over until they master the skill, whereas kids who don’t need as much remediation can move ahead at their own pace. It also offers teachers the example of how to most effectively implement the lessons in their classroom – and, for those parents of English language learners, they too can watch the lessons with their children and learn.

Ventriglia-Navarrette says she came away with a whole new respect for the possibilities offered through online learning.

“I have to say, I was very adamant, being involved in linguistics and second language learners, that conversations are how you learn a language. I mean, I wrote a book while I was at Harvard about this very topic. And while I still think that is true, there are many different ways to do it,” she says. “Online has so many potential advantages.” ■