Interview with
Lisa Luedeke, Corwin Press
&
Nancy Frey, The Distance Learning Playbook

For podcast release
Monday, November 23, 2020

KENNEALLY: A publishing dictionary defines crashing as putting pedal to the metal when it comes to a book manuscript. Crash books are published on an accelerated schedule to meet reader demand and adjust to dynamic market conditions.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center’s podcast series. I’m Christopher Kenneally.

In March, the world flipped from physical to virtual to combat the first wave of the novel coronavirus pandemic. Almost overnight, K to 12 education shifted its setting from homerooms to rooms in homes. And while distance learning wasn’t new, families and teachers both needed to learn fast about making the digital grade. Editors at Corwin, a SAGE publishing company and leading provider of professional learning books and products, determined to move fast, too. In just weeks, Corwin Press published The Distance Learning Playbook, a project that usually would have taken 18 months. Even more quickly, The Distance Learning Playbook became a K to 12 educational industry bestseller and has generated a series of books and resources for parents, university educators and school leaders.

Lisa Luedeke, publisher and director at Corwin Press, joins me to share what she and colleagues have learned when publishing in a pandemic. Lisa, welcome to the program.

LUEDEKE: Thanks for having me, Chris.

KENNEALLY: And Lisa, we understand today, some months into the pandemic, that pandemic teaching really isn’t distance learning – it’s crisis teaching, crisis learning. Was this crisis publishing that you were practicing?

LUEDEKE: Yeah. I think it really was. In the early months of the pandemic, we weren’t sure how long this was going to go on, and there were hopes across the country that perhaps we’d be back in school in the fall. But by May, when we first started working on The Distance Learning Playbook, we realized that that probably
wasn’t going to happen and that schools were going to be perhaps not learning in person in the fall, and that teachers and schools needed to figure out how they were going to handle that. They’d been doing crisis teaching, as you called it – pandemic teaching – in the spring. But in the fall, what they really wanted to do was something a little bit more sophisticated and more effective than what they’d done in the spring, so that’s when we decided to rush *The Distance Learning Playbook* to market.

KENNEALLY: Right. But crisis publishing sort of conjures up images of people racing around the room. Was this a race against time? And describe how it felt to be under that kind of constraint.

LUEDEKE: It was absolutely a race against time. It was mid-May, and we knew that there was a short window for teachers to – and schools – to do their professional learning before the fall classes started. We knew that people needed the book immediately – at the latest, beginning in July and going into August because most schools start in September in the East and some even earlier, in August, in the west part of the country.

KENNEALLY: And so when you had to pivot from this traditional publishing practice that is kind of more lackadasical than crisis practice, what did you need to do? What was the impact across the workflow?

LUEDEKE: I didn’t even know – and I’ve been publishing for 22 years – I didn’t know that we could actually pull this off. But some folks at SAGE said yes, we can, if we get everybody on board across the company, so the first thing that had to be done was the book had to be written, and that was Doug and Nancy – Doug Fisher, Nancy Frey and John Hattie’s work. And luckily, they are very prolific and experienced writers, and they were able to write a manuscript in two weeks. I then edited it over Memorial Day weekend, which was only possible because the manuscript came in in such good shape, and that was the first step toward getting the book out in six weeks.

KENNEALLY: And then, from there – from accepted manuscript and edited manuscript – there’s so many more steps that really aren’t visible to most people. They know about how a book gets written, they know how they can buy a book, but everything in the middle is all the work that you do there at Corwin Press. So tell us more about the impact of this crisis publishing practice on that – digital print production, distribution, publicity, even.
LUEDEKE: Yeah. Everybody, like I said, across the company had to be brought in, and basically, it was drop everything and do this particular book. All other projects had to be put aside, so that the people on my team, for example, who are responsible for clearing permissions in the book dropped everything else and focused on that. Our production team dropped everything – all the other projects they were doing – and focused on this one book. I don’t think they’d ever done anything like it, either, and we all, I think, sort of surprised ourselves that we were able to pull it off.

Once the publication date approaching in July, we knew we could get it out – I believe it was July 7th was the publication date. But we had a conference that we normally have two or three thousand people at this conference every July. It’s the annual Visible Learning Convention. And we’d flipped that into a virtual event. And Doug and Nancy, two of the authors, were speaking on distance learning at that event, and they needed to – we needed to get the book there. And the book couldn’t be bound and shipped by then so, instead, we did a digital version that could be there on time, so the digital version basically helps you get in print much more quickly and get something in people’s hands.

KENNEALLY: And an audience that can begin to spread the word, which is the critical piece in this. The book has since gone on to become a bestseller on the PW list. But what was it that you had to do next as far as getting the audience’s attention for the book?

LUEDEKE: Yeah. Again, it was drop everything and run with it, and that was left to our marketing team. Maura Sullivan, who’s one of the finest marketing people I’ve ever worked with – she was in charge of this book, and she just threw everything she had into it and got the word out. And the audience responded so quickly, because there wasn’t anything else like it. We managed to be first on the scene. We put together a package that included the digital version and the print version, so that people would get the print version afterward, when it was available, because that’s what most people in our industry want is a paperbound book. So they got the digital version, then the print version came along, and word spread like wildfire. One school district of another started adopting it, and July and August were just insane months, because we were trying to print enough to keep up. And at the beginning, we weren’t able to.

KENNEALLY: Well, you’re a publisher there, but you’re also a book author. I wonder if you can tell us how you sympathize with the plight of those authors. They had to deliver a manuscript in two weeks.
LUEDEKE: Yes. Yeah, I possibly would have frozen under those circumstances as an author myself. I write fiction. I write young adult literature, so it’s a little bit different. But yeah, no, those authors are so – they have so much experience. I said this before, that I don’t think, without Doug, Nancy and John, this project would have been possible. I really don’t know any other authors that could write a book of that quality in two weeks and hand it to their editor. I really don’t know anyone else that could do that, so without these authors, we really – this wouldn’t have been possible at all.

KENNEALLY: And quality is important. The authors – the coauthors – are highly regarded researchers. They base their recommendations and their insights on research, on data, so they probably were as concerned as you were with getting this right.

LUEDEKE: Oh, yeah, they’re meticulous. Everything that goes out the door with their name on it needs to be excellent. But like I said, they’ve written so many books – they wrote all the books in this series this year in a matter of months. And it’s because they have that research and that knowledge in their heads. Doug and Nancy run a school – a public school – Health Sciences High and Middle College – in San Diego, California. They founded this public school. And they lead it. They teach there. They’re also professors at San Diego State University. They have also written over 50 books in their careers, so the information is at their fingertips. They were living it by having to transform their own school to distance teaching this spring and working with their own teachers to make sure it worked, so they had all that information right there, and they could put it to use in the book.

KENNEALLY: And when you began this project – I have to ask you how it felt. Did it feel like a real gamble? Did you think, you know, well, it’s a bet but you’re pretty sure you can deliver?

LUEDEKE: It didn’t feel like a gamble, because I have such faith in Doug and Nancy and John, so I knew that it was going to be an excellent book, and I knew the market needed it, so we knew it was going to be successful. What we didn’t know was how successful it was going to be. We really had no idea. And making the Publishers Weekly bestseller list at number one was something we’d never even considered. Professional books for teachers just don’t make those lists.

KENNEALLY: And in fact, not only did you make the number-one spot, but the book has sold quite well indeed. Are you willing to tell us how many copies have been published?
LUEDEKE: Sold over 400,000 copies so far, and it’s still selling.

KENNEALLY: That’s a heck of a number, 400,000 copies. And so I guess I have to ask you, as a publisher, is this the way you want to publish books moving forward?

LUEDEKE: Well, we want them to sell that way. Do we want to go this quickly? No, because we had to drop everything else and run, and we have a lot of authors and books that we want to put out in a given year. But what we did learn was that we really can do this if we have to, and that we can be more flexible and nimble in a situation like this, where it’s called for. And we’re still in a great deal of transition right now in this country. We don’t know what’s coming next. We don’t know when kids are going to be back in school and when we’re going to have to rebound from this experience, so going into next year, we are considering shorter publishing schedules as needed, if something comes up that our audience really, really needs to have in a timely way.

KENNEALLY: Lisa Luedeke, publisher and director at Corwin Press, thanks for joining me.

LUEDEKE: Thanks so much for having me, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Joining me now is Nancy Frey, coauthor, with Doug Fisher and John Hattie, of *The Distance Learning Playbook*. She is a professor at San Diego State University in educational leadership and is also a teacher-leader at Health Sciences High and Middle College, an award-winning open-enrollment public school in the City Heights neighborhood of San Diego, which she founded in 2007. Welcome to the program, Nancy.

FREY: Thanks so much for having me, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Well, we are looking forward to speaking with you, Nancy, because we’ve been just chatting with Lisa Luedeke about her own experience with crisis publishing when it comes to *The Distance Learning Playbook*. And I want to ask you about your own take on crisis writing and crisis teaching because, I guess, after all, everything in this pandemic seems to deserve that crisis label. And I’d like to start by asking you about what it was like working with your colleagues, Douglas Fisher and John Hattie, on this accelerated publishing schedule. What was it like responding to the pressure that you were under?
FREY: Chris, you’re right. Everything about 2020 certainly is shaping up to be a crisis of one kind or another. But you know, Winston Churchill always said never let a crisis go to waste, and I feel like, retrospectively, that’s where we were, as well. It was great to be able to work with Doug and John. The three of us together have written quite a bit before, so that partnership in terms of writing was already there. I think that that definitely gave us collectively a leg up, because we knew one another as writers from previous projects.

The other aspect of it is, just in thinking, — again, retrospectively — about where we were at that time and, while it was a very compressed writing schedule, it was also a writing schedule of our own making. It was a schedule that we put out there and said we need to get this done as quickly as we humanly can, still doing a good job, but to get it into the hands of educators as quickly as we could, and so with that came a lot of energy around finding ways to be able to write all of that.

KENNEALLY: Well, I appreciate that point. It really would have required a tremendous amount of energy. For the other authors out there, for the readers of the book who wonder where you got it from, give us some hint. Where do you find the energy? Was it just this sense of mission that you have?

FREY: I think that that’s a good way to describe it. I think that all of us, as educators, collectively are feeling that way. And if there was a time to be able to, hopefully, get ideas out that sparked other people’s ideas, then that’s exactly what it was that we wanted to do. We had a good platform for being able to work from — as I said — not only in terms of our previous collective writing experiences together, but also because we were really working from the research in particular that John Hattie has done. And that became our foundation. That became our platform for being able to do so.

In addition, we were also lucky enough to collaborate with what amounted to being about 74 educators from all over the world as they talked to us, they shared their practices with us, they answered the e-mails, they hopped on calls with us to let us know, in real time, what their experiences were, what questions they had, so that became another great motivator, because we wanted to be able to serve not only these people that we’re working so closely with but also just being able to give back to a profession that has meant so much collectively to the three of us.

KENNEALLY: And that intellectual platform that you described — that’s the Visible Learning platform that you have been working on for some years, and so I suppose,
even though you were in this hurry-up mode, you were able to stand on a foundation of real firm research and intellectual rigor.

FREY: Exactly. And I think that the place that we came from is especially in already knowing what the research, the metanalyses were on distance learning itself – that it’s actually been around for a long time. There have been a lot of studies that have been done, and it’s been demonstrated overall that it’s a pretty neutral effect. In other words, it’s not the platform itself that makes a difference. The change is – the change agent, rather, is not whether it’s in a distance-learning environment or whether it’s in a face-to-face environment. We like to call it brick or click. Brick or click is kind of a neutral experience. It’s the decisions that teachers make as students are learning that make the difference in either environment, and so that, I think, kind of opened up us, freed us up to be able to say, well, we know a lot about making decisions in learning and teaching. And that became the place that we springboarded from.

KENNEALLY: Well, because so many families are experiencing this firsthand last year and this year, share with us some of the things you’ve learned about what works best with distance learning – what works best for teachers, what works best for parents, and of course what works for the children too.

FREY: In terms of teachers, I think it’s that moment of drawing a breath and saying, OK, I didn’t forget how to teach just because I’m in a different platform. In other words, to go back to what it is that we know in terms of teaching and learning and move from the known to the new rather than starting off with a blank slate and saying I don’t know anything. Of course you know a lot. Of course you know a lot as a teacher. What we have to do is go from the known to the new, so draw on the things that you know, first of all.

In terms of students, I think one of our big learnings, if you will, is what students, in effect, have been saying to us for years and years and years, which is that students need to own their own learning, that students need to be involved to be able to see the learning as relevant to them in their lives, and to be able to make the kinds of choices and decisions that come along with feeling a true sense of ownership and not just compliance, not just because adults are telling me I have to do all of these things.

And then finally, for parents, I hope that the message is this – we value them so much. We value families so much. Between school and home, those are the two tentpoles in a child’s life. And what it is that they do when they love their child,
when they talk to their child, when they read with their child – they’re helping. They are doing the things that we need for them to do.

I wanted to make sure to take as much of the learning burden off of families and let them know you do not to be your child’s chemistry teacher. We’ve got that. But you bring so much to what it is that their child is able to learn, and that matters, and that’s enough.

KENNEALLY: Well, what’s interesting about that, Nancy Frey, is that it is not about the technology. You haven’t said a word about technology or devices or digital transformation. You’re talking about senses of personal value, whether it’s the teacher who values their own experience, whether it’s the student who values their sense of ownership, and even the parents, who sort of value the growth they’re seeing in their children. This is all very human and not at all to do with the machines that we’re working with.

FREY: Correct. And Chris, don’t get me wrong. In no way would any of us say, hey, distance learning, that’s the new ideal. Not at all. We are doing the things that we’re doing for a reason, right, to be able to stay safe, to be able to stay as healthy as we can and so on. None of us would ever argue distance learning is absolutely the only way to go from here on out, but rather to be able to say this is what it is that we have right now and to make sure that we are noting what it is that we’re finding successful so that, as we return to school that we can begin to change the syntax of schooling.

How is it that we are, when we return to school, going to continue to build children’s self-regulation and build their ownership and build relevance into our lessons, into what it is that we teach? Those are all things that we need to note as being successful from here on out, so that we can take it forward into the next iteration of schooling. We want to future-proof our students, which means we want to give them the ability to be able to learn in lots of different environments. That’s what our true goal is.

KENNEALLY: Well, you’re talking about success there. And really, when it comes to success, this book, *The Distance Learning Playbook*, has enjoyed a great deal of success. How did it feel to see the book take off like it did? And are you going to iterate, as you were just suggesting – for the teacher and the parents and the students, you’re going to iterate this experience and follow it yet again, are you going to try to do this kind of hurry-up authoring and publishing on your next project?
FREY: Well, in terms of just seeing the success and the response, it has been humbling, to say the least. It has really been remarkable. And there is so much credit that is toward Corwin for being able to find ways to be able to get this out in record time. We so appreciate the response from the field. And in fact, because there has been that great response, what we’ve been able to do is to continue to gather those ideas, and so we’ve written The Distance Learning Playbook for Parents. We partnered with Rosalind Wiseman on that. We’ve written The Distance Learning Playbook for School Leaders, thinking about leadership and so in a distance-learning environment. And what is coming out very soon is Distance Learning Assessment. How is that we’re assessing learning, both formatively and summatively, in going forward? It’s been a great way to be able to just gather up these wonderful ideas that are coming from all across the field. So yes, the writing continues, but we’re so inspired by these wonderful ideas that, in some ways, it makes the writing kind of easy.

KENNEALLY: Well, that’s probably a great insight into the writing process. Inspiration is what’s going to get you to the end of the manuscript.

FREY: Exactly. When you have something to say, the writing comes. And I have had such a wonderful opportunity to be able to work with Doug and to be able to work with John, and we read each other’s stuff and we comment on each other’s stuff. And there’s lots of trust between the three of us that it’s elevated, I believe, collectively our writing for all of us.

KENNEALLY: Nancy Frey, coauthor, with Doug Fisher and John Hattie, of The Distance Learning Playbook, thanks so much for joining me on the program.

FREY: Thanks so much, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Velocity of Content is produced by Copyright Clearance Center. Our coproducer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. Subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts and follow us on Twitter and Facebook. I’m Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening, and join us again soon on CCC’s Velocity of Content podcast.

END OF FILE