



Resources For Teaching and Learning During This Period of Social Distancing

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As each passing day brings more school closures, educators and families scramble to respond to a situation that is uncertain and without precedent. Will the term be extended? Will the year be lost? How will college admissions be affected? How will learning continue while kids are stuck indoors for weeks? Who will look after the kids? The rapid imposition of social distancing took many by surprise, and each school and individual teacher must contend with unique challenges as they grapple with the crisis. Some districts have sent kids home with a provisional two weeks worth of homework, while others have followed universities like Stanford and Berkeley and pivoted to remote learning in a bid to salvage the year. While the move online is the best approach to continue classes, it not only entails a change in format, but also demands a change in practice.

Designing effective distance learning programs requires planning and targeted professional development. Teachers who did not expect to teach online were caught understandably unprepared in the final leg of the school year. Some schools have the support systems in place that will make the transition easier, while many others have students who do not have reliable internet access.

The web offers countless best practice guides and curated tool inventories, but educators currently in triage mode are not in a position to craft ideal online learning programs. This brief guide aims to help educators, administrators, and parents better navigate the pitfalls of making the quick jump to online learning. It curates useful tools and resources with a view to maintain the indispensable human touch of teaching and learning during this period of social distancing.

The Foundation: A Flexible Mindset and Realistic Expectations

A positive attitude and a flexible mindset are key to make the online transition as smooth as possible. There is some liberation in accepting that the entire world is imperfectly adjusting to a new reality, and nobody expects business as usual.

Classes will not continue seamlessly, and lessons will have to be rejiggered to work within the constraints of time and technology. Formal tests and exams are difficult to administer online and will likely be postponed or cancelled. Science experiments, maker projects, and physical activities that require specialized equipment or spaces may no longer be possible. The school year will not unfold as planned, all curricular goals will not be met, and expectations should be managed accordingly. Rather, learning online may present an opportunity to apply creative solutions, learn some new tricks, connect with students in a new context, and support the community by keeping kids stimulated and productively occupied. Sounds an awful lot like business as usual.

Leaders can best serve their schools and districts by prioritizing mental health over curricular efficiency. The anxiety produced by the evolving crisis is compounded with teachers who may now have their own children to care for at home, ill family members, the stress of managing household resources to comply with social distancing measures, or they may fall ill themselves. This is the context in which some teachers are asked to quickly redeploy their classes. Ideally, they will be granted sufficient time to organize their lives and reconfigure their classes before resuming teaching. It is also important for administrators to actively check-in with teachers to maintain personalized communication and take the pulse on how to best provide support.

Likewise, teachers should try to maintain personal connections with their students, which can be a challenge when mitigated by the Internet. But strong student-teacher relationships positively affect school engagement and achievement, and meaningful connections are particularly important for high schoolers, and vulnerable students in particular. Online learning can feel isolating and lacks the warmth of a busy classroom; however, teachers who transition from face-to-face classes have the advantage of having established relationships with their students. These can continue by facilitating informal interactions, such as sharing class-room appropriate memes, comics, images, or humorous short videos that may not be entirely relevant, but can help maintain the community and set an uplifting tone. Similarly, the class can use forums for formal discussion, but also to post pictures, stories and updates. Rather than whole-class meetings, organize periodic video meet-ups with smaller groups of students to chat, check-in and provide help, support and assistance. Finally, if school policy allows, individual calls and check-ins to support struggling students is crucial, as distance learning particularly disadvantages students who struggle. On the flipside, online formats might be an advantage for some kids with autism.

Most importantly, be kind and forgiving of yourself and your students. The next few months will be emotionally taxing, so pedagogical energies are better directed to the heart than the mind. Subject learning is important but, as the world is reshaped in the foreseeable future, there will be opportunities to learn invaluable lessons about community, family, civic responsibility, and social health: central components of human life that can be woven into the curriculum.

The Home/Work Routine: Workspace, Calendar, and Survey

First step: organize your space and time at home to accommodate your new work environment. As many veteran telecommuters will attest to, there's an art to working at home. Basic daily practices like showering, changing into work clothes, setting up a firm work schedule and a designated work area are all advisable. There are countless websites and blogs devoted to advising on the trials and triumphs of working at home. Online learning is often asynchronous and can involve variable timetables, so using a shared calendar such as iCal or Google

Calendar will not only help organize a dynamic schedule, but also afford easy sharing with parents and students.

Glen Irvin, an Instructional Coach at Sauk Rapids-Rice Public Schools in Minnesota, who has taught and learned online, suggests that schools should circulate a preliminary survey to gauge student connectivity.

“The best advice I can give you is to do an audit of your school community’s technology capability,” said Irvin in a recent webinar. “In our district, we wanted to make sure we dug deep into what kind of access our students have and what does that mean for the delivery of teaching and learning in these online environments.”

Teachers who want to poll their students can use Google Forms or the free trial version of Survey Monkey. The survey might also invite student recommendations of platforms, tools or viable social media that might be used to meet them where they are.

Leverage the Power of Community

While waiting for survey results, explore at least one of the online communities that have recently sprung-up to share resources in response to school closures. Facebook groups such as Educator Temporary School Closure for Online Learning or Online Teaching Tips for the Plague-Averse are great places to start. They are spaces to share material, ask questions, trade stories, commiserate, vent, and connect through shared experience. Many of the groups are international and North American educators can benefit from their counterparts in China, Japan and Italy who are several weeks into emergency online implementation. It’s also advisable to maintain contact with immediate colleagues to provide mutual support. Also, for teachers looking to keep their children occupied while they work at home, Participate, a community-building company, recently launched a free and open Learning at Home group.

Educational communities are also circulating shared documents that offer an array of resources to help teach online. For example, this document of shared resources for virtual learning in emergency school closure was co-authored by educators from around the world, and organizes most of its resources according to age categories. Some keep updated lists of companies offering free subscriptions due to school closures, and this handy chart organizes web-based tools according to the 5Es of online learning.

Quick Start Guides, Platforms, and Tools

Several organizations and companies have published quick start guides to help teachers hit the ground running. The Academy of Active Learning Arts and Sciences (AALAS), which specializes in supporting flipped classrooms, offers a free Rapid Transition to Online Learning (RTOL) program to help educators efficiently transfer their courses to an online format. Global Online Academy (GOA) recently published an excellent comprehensive playbook that targets school leadership, but also has value for teachers. Similarly, the Khan Academy also has a Remote Quickstart Guide to leverage their extensive course offerings.

Some teachers will have existing learning management systems (LMSs) and web-based apps that can be repurposed for online classes. Extending the use of the same tools online saves the trouble of students having to navigate new software. If teachers must adopt a platform from which to deliver their classes, there are many free options. National School Choice Week (NSCW)

recommends these [free online communication platforms](#) as well as other useful tools to get educators up and running. [Google Classroom](#) is a user-friendly option that is designed for classroom use but works well for online environments. [Moodle](#), a free open source learning platform, offers a robust toolbox that can be leveraged for distance learning. For group video conferencing, [Skype](#), [Hangouts](#), [Hangouts Meets](#) and [Zoom](#) are good free options.

Teachers who want to keep it simple can DIY their own delivery system using shared work platforms like Google's [G Suite](#) software. A shared class agenda with links to tasks and resources can be created and shared on a single Google Doc. PDFs, images and other files can be stored on Google Drive and linked to the class agenda. Formative tests, quizzes and polls can be created and circulated with Google Forms, and lessons can be organized on Google Slides. Microsoft's [Office 365](#) would also do the trick, but it's not free.

Beyond platforms and content delivery systems, an Internet search will yield countless free applications and online tools. The [Tech Against Coronavirus](#) site curates an thorough [list of online tools](#) to facilitate COVID19-era communication. The CATO Institute curated a list of [free online resources](#) to support learning at home, while UNESCO jumped into the [emergency toolbox](#) game with this well-organized list of educational technology resources. Scholastic announced that it is offering a [free 20-day Learn at Home](#) program for K - 8 students.

Has there been a better time for students to take field trips to [virtual museums](#), play in the [Minecraft](#) playground, run through a few rounds of [Kahoot](#), or tune-in for a [Skype lecture](#) by a special guest speaker? "Everything is the technology of online education," said Joanna Dunlap, Assistant Director of Teaching Effectiveness University of Colorado - Denver, alluding to the vast spectrum for enhancing online instruction.

And, if all else fails, there's always email and telephone.

The Silver Lining

The sudden shift to online education will undoubtedly pose a challenge for many, but there's also an upside. Disruption and discomfort are the enemies of complacency and can spur intense professional growth. Some teachers may be surprised to discover new tools, resources, and approaches to nourish their practice. They'll also get the chance to see their students in a new light, and maybe better connect with their own families. In the case of younger students, there will be a need to more deeply involve parents in the learning process. Schools may want to explicitly communicate that any parents in a position to support their children's learning should do so with some helpful guidelines to proceed.

Another positive is that remote learning can be carried out asynchronously, meaning that both teachers and students can work and contribute when it's convenient for them if they don't have to be in a specific place at a specific time. This flexibility can allow educators to manage life at home while doing school, and it might even allow kids to get that sleep that seems to be in short supply.