ONLINE LEARNING

7 Guidelines for Setting Up Clear Online Lessons

The way a lesson is laid out online can make all the difference in whether a student can follow along and execute it successfully.

By Elizabeth Skopec

August 3, 2020

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When our classrooms moved online this year, many of us scrambled to find ways to engage students with lessons remotely, only to find that it was no simple task. Many of us, myself included, didn't know where to start.

Even the most basic communications, like the daily lessons that I posted for students, were trickier than I anticipated; my posts careened from being too wordy to too vague, from too content-heavy to too task-heavy. Students felt overwhelmed by their new, independent workload, and I wasn't streamlining our learning effectively. It just wasn't easy to transform a 50-minute lesson into a clear, pithy post that would serve my high school students.

Fortunately, my students weren't shy about giving feedback that helped me hone my daily posts, and over time, I was able to make my lessons more navigable, readable, and engaging.

7 GUIDELINES TO SET THE STAGE FOR ONLINE LEARNING

1. Same time, same place: Post your lessons in the same place every day. Once students know where you'll be posting your materials for the day—whether it's on a certain page of a learning management system or via email—be consistent and encourage kids to bookmark the landing page. Be sure to publish at the same time every day, too. If other teachers in your school can align and post in the same way, all the better.

2. Remind and reinforce: Your first few posts should begin with reiterating where and when students should check for lessons. I always posted my daily lessons in the announcements section of our learning management system at 8:00 a.m., and my first week of posts included a reminder that students should always check that space at or after that time. When students or parents emailed with questions, including a stock phrase about when and where to locate lessons helped keep everyone in the know.

3. Emphasize the date: Title your posts the day of the week and date. Because

some students may fall behind and others may want to refer back to lessons, organizing with the date keeps your posts immutably anchored and sequenced. Students won't always see the continuity implied in posts that are labeled with the lesson's focus (such as a thesis statement lesson that precedes the lesson on quotation selection), but they'll definitely know that Tuesday, September 1, comes before Wednesday, September 2.

4. 1-2-3: Use numbers to drive students through your lessons. For me, the first item listed was always attendance, and after that, I listed content for the lesson, relevant documents, and links for submissions. I got positive feedback from students when I kept my posts light on language, organized by simple numerical signposts. This was also a helpful way for me to see when my lesson was getting out of hand; once I got to number five, I knew that I was probably at the outer limits of what most students could reasonably tolerate from me in a day.

5. Link everything: During online learning, students are already in a tough spot (just like we are), and any little roadblock—like being unable to locate a rubric—is going to feel insurmountable. It takes an extra minute to link a document, a helpful website, or an assignment submission, but if you don't have links in the post, you'll spend a lot more time answering emails and chasing after kids who didn't do the work or didn't do the work properly.

6. Remember when...? At the end of most posts, I included a summary of the previous day's post, cut down to the most important points and links. This was usually just a few sentences long, harvested from the previous post in a simple cut-and-paste, but students appreciated the convenience of being able to access refresher materials easily. I found this was also helpful for kids who tended to access the course inconsistently; if they tried to jump into a day's lesson, this brief review was helpful in orienting them to the day's learning. And, because this is the last section of the post, students who didn't need it became acclimated to skipping it, which was easier to do at the end of the post than if it had been inserted elsewhere.

7. Include a video overview: Lastly, create a short screen cast with a voice-over that walks students through the day's post. This was a step I skipped for the first few weeks of remote learning, and when my students asked for it, it felt a little silly—why do they want a two-minute video of me reading the post to them? But once I did it, I saw that it helped knit together all of the seemingly disparate pieces of the day's lesson, giving students a more holistic view of their "in class" time that day. This also turned out to be a helpful way to proofread my own work, ensuring that none of those typos or dead links made it to my final publication. Once I made a video overview, I inserted it at the top of my post, above the first element in my list.

Online learning will never replicate our time in the classroom, but following these simple steps can help keep learning accessible, which is a pretty good place to start.

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THE RESEARCH IS IN

Reading the Virtual Classroom Is Hard, but It Can Be Done

Many teachers find it difficult to gauge how well students understand a lesson in an online classroom. A technique common among award-winning online instructors should help.

By Youki Terada

August 5, 2020

In the early 1900s, scientists were baffled by a horse that could seemingly perform arithmetic. Using his hoof, Clever Hans would tap out answers to simple math problems, and could even tell time and keep track of the days in a calendar. Having ruled out fraud—Clever Hans could answer questions even if his trainer was out of sight—a reporter from *The New York Times* **declared** Hans an "expert in numbers" whose abilities were verified by "eminent scientific and military authorities."

It wasn't until several years later that a scientist, after conducting several experiments, realized that the animal was able to read nonverbal cues from the audience: facial expressions, eye contact, posture, even the release of a held breath. When a question was asked, Clever Hans was able to tell who in the audience knew the correct answer, and by tapping on the floor, what the correct answer was based on subtle changes in body language. He couldn't do math—but what he could do was still pretty amazing.

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ONLINE LEARNING

How to Make Remote or Hybrid Math and Science Instruction Engaging

Take advantage of online resources and simple experiments students can do at home to keep them learning in all teaching scenarios.

By Pete Barnes

August 3, 2020

Teaching science and math is fun because of the smiles. And the messes. And the "oohs" when you light something on fire, or make the first cut of a dissection, or finally solve that tricky algebra equation. But how do you keep it fun and engaging remotely? Or if half of your students are learning from home in a hybrid teaching model?

The ideas presented here can be adapted for most upper elementary or middle school classrooms for both of these scenarios.

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BACK TO SCHOOL

How to Plan When You Don't Know What to Plan For

What school will look like in the fall is still uncertain for most of the U.S., but teachers can develop flexible plans that work for distance and in-class teaching.

By Katie Hicks, Sarah Schroeder

July 8, 2020

As teachers, we're planners—it's just who we are. But how do we plan when we don't know what to plan for? During a recent professional development session with a local district, the number one question teachers asked me was what next year would look like. The truth is: We don't know what's coming our way. Even with glimpses of plans, no one really knows what's coming.

With so much outside our control, there are a few things teachers can do now. Set up your classroom to operate in all ways: face-to-face, remote, and blended (a combination of both). Know that you're likely to use all these methods at some point next year.

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LITERACY

Is it Time to Drop 'Finding the Main Idea' and Teach Reading in a New Way?

Some schools are changing the way they teach reading—based on research that shows background knowledge is more critical to comprehension than general skills like 'finding the main idea.'

By Holly Korbey

July 28, 2020

Early in the school year at John Ruhrah Elementary and Middle School, co-teachers Darene Parry and Megan Healy were already diving deep into a lesson about the human heart, showing their fourth graders detailed anatomical diagrams and introducing vocabulary like *cardio* and *circulatory*.

Surprisingly, the unit on "having a good heart"—rich in scientific dialogue and writing practice—is not part of science class, but English language arts (ELA).

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ONLINE LEARNING

2 Simple Ways to Improve Online Instruction

Distance learning started as an emergency in the spring, but teachers are finding ways to make it better, even for students working on smartphones.

By Jorge Valenzuela

July 17, 2020

As the new school year looms in the U.S., many teachers are unsure of the exact amount of time they will need to dedicate to remote teaching. With departments of education and districts looking to maintain both teacher and student attendance while minimizing the risk of coronavirus outbreaks in their schools, we know that remote learning isn't going away at this time.

Through staggered calendars and schedules, many schools hope to keep their students and staff safe by reducing class sizes in efforts to maintain social distancing for the time being. Although research on staggered scheduling shows that the practice can have positive effects on academic results, educators will need to continue making pedagogical shifts and pivots to adjust to yet another new instructional day in their efforts to engage all learners.

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ONLINE LEARNING

Designing Your LMS to Make Distance Learning Better

Intentionally setting up a learning management system where everything students need is easy to access can help them all be successful.

By Sarah Schroeder

July 14, 2020

When remote learning hit, I was ready. My daughter had been in online school for three years. I teach technology integration. But during this time, our family struggled. I found that my son, a straight-A student in a traditional school setting, got distracted, lost track of assignments, and struggled academically.

So what happened? And what would help students like him? It seems to me that we teachers can use our learning management system (LMS)—Canvas, Schoology, Google Classroom, etc.—to build a digital home base for our learners. Grounding design in a delicate combination of empathy and simplicity, we can use our LMS to build community, increase usability, and keep everyone on track and on task.

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COMMUNICATION SKILLS

How to Set the Stage for Challenging Classroom Discussions

Creating a safer space for students to engage with controversial topics starts with shared norms like "assume best intentions" and "show respect and courage."

August 5, 2020

George Lucas Educational Foundation

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EDUCATION EQUITY

Using Data to Advance Racial Equity

Schools that strive for equity can collect, interpret, and use data about students in purposeful and self-reflective ways.

By Andrew Ford

August 4, 2020

The Black Lives Matter protests aren't just about police brutality. The movement asks all institutions, including schools, to take a hard look at themselves and identify policies that contribute to systemic racism—and then to reform them.

Data is a crucial tool for teachers, administrators, and principals to begin this reflection process. But too often, racial blindness and deficit-based thinking can corrupt data analysis. When they do, school personnel may inadvertently arrive at conclusions that mischaracterize or harm students of color.

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Making PD More Meaningful Through Personalization

Teachers can get much more out of professional development when school leaders encourage them to tailor it to their own needs.

By Andrew J. Canlé

August 3, 2020

We educators find meaning in work that stems from inner passions, interests, ambitions, and the desire to help young minds grow. We also discover meaning as we build our own capacity to continually improve. Noteworthy lightbulb moments and learning experiences related to our particular disciplines lead to valuable awakenings we use to refine our skills and help children along their path of academic discovery.

It appears commonplace in education, however, that teachers find these special moments and true learning experiences to be scarce during typical professional development (PD) sessions. Many educators maintain that this training lacks relevance to their practice, and the term *professional development* conjures up images of Ben Stein instructing Ferris Bueller's classmates half to sleep.

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TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION

How Green Screens Bring Learning to Life

A simple video production technique can animate a wide range of student projects—and instill new energy in distance learning.

By Justine Bruyère

July 31, 2020

Teaching has always been as much about what we do as how we do it. It's about asking the right questions, using the right tools, and igniting students' curiosity to engage with content—even when we're not in the same physical space. Although much has changed in education over these last few months, students' curiosity and wonder have not. So it may be necessary, now more than ever, to embrace technology as a way of tapping into student interest.

My 15 years as an educator have taught me that a multimodal approach to learning—that is, working with different forms of media and with a number of senses—is one of the best ways to differentiate, build knowledge, and inspire creativity. Additionally, a multimodal approach has been shown to sharpen memory and improve attention to difficult tasks.

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