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.

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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](https://www.npr.org/2020/05/07/851447550/a-few-schools-reopen-but-remote-learning-could-go-on-for-years-in-u-s) 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](https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/what-does-research-say-about-staggered-school-calendars) 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.

Whether students are in classrooms or are working fully at home, teachers will want to maintain personal contact with them, especially their most disadvantaged students. Frequent check-ins—in person, over phone or email, or through the class LMS—will help teachers better understand students’ needs, providing them the insight needed to design more equitable lessons that address both academic and social and emotional learning for disadvantaged students, and all of their students.

In the months since the pandemic caused an emergency rush to distance learning, many teachers have made significant strides in improving the remote teaching skills they need to reach all learners. The new school year can allow us to improve our online lesson delivery still further by balancing the effective use of edtech with good teaching practice. Here are two relatively simple strategies to make online instruction better.

**Make Lessons Interactive and Accessible 24/7**

When teaching students face-to-face, my strategy for engagement is to use systematic and reflective strategies in tandem with interactive activities. This consistent practice helps build a collaborative culture, establish and maintain norms, and develop an inquiry mindset in students. Teachers will need to recreate this online to make their remote lessons engaging.

Nearpod can help, through a student engagement platform designed to make lessons interactive and accessible with or without a facilitator. This feature aids learning remotely because it allows students multiple chances for capturing the content and improving both their skills and transfer. Teachers can launch their lessons in a [student-paced mode](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_VkfcKDwE4) and can monitor the completion of the work.

Nearpod also allows teachers to [add interactive activities](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koXy6DFEfek) to lessons, which enables student participation in both real-time and self-paced lessons in fun ways. This feature is multifaceted and has several interactive options, including adding polls, fill-in-the-blank activities, matching pairs, short quizzes, and open-ended questions, and having students [draw a picture to show their learning](https://vimeo.com/302928012). Each of these activities can be designed to fit the context of all age groups and generates data back to educators about how well the content is being learned.

It’s also worth mentioning that students can easily access Nearpod on their parents’ or guardians’ smartphones, ﻿making the learning more accessible to students who do not have Wi-Fi access or a computer at home.

**Foster Student Collaboration Via Virtual Breakout Rooms**

Having students work together in pairs during activities or in teams to complete a task or product is critical learning work in lessons that teachers do not have to eliminate when teaching remotely. Incorporating collaborative activities during virtual class meetups enhances instruction the same way it does when teaching in person. For this purpose, I like to use the Zoom platform to place my learners in [breakout rooms](https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206476093-Getting-Started-with-Breakout-Rooms) at various points of my lesson. I use either strategically or randomly chosen groupings depending on my purpose. For example, when students need to partner for project work, I group them purposefully. For activities like turn and talk or learning circles, they can be randomly assigned a partner or partners.

Again, students who lack Wi-Fi access and/or a computer can join live lessons via smartphones and still participate in all of the activities along with their peers.

Collaborative activities that can be conducted via breakout rooms include [storytelling](https://ucanr.edu/sites/tfc/files/134496.pdf), turn and talk, learning stations or centers, workshops, jigsaws, [think pair share](http://virtualteachingcommons.org/think-pair-share/), and feedback protocols like [critical friends](https://buildingpublicunderstanding.org/assets/files/critical_friend_conv.pdf) and [gallery walk](https://topr.online.ucf.edu/digitalizing-gallery-walks-method-student-centered-feedback-engagement/).

Mastering working in groups virtually will take some practice before most students become pros, but relatively quickly the experience will keep them engaged in enhancing their communication and problem-solving skills. Teachers in kindergarten to second grade will need to encourage parents and guardians to log in to assist learners with navigating the tech. Older kids can learn to schedule their own teamwork time once they are comfortable using the Zoom app independent of their teachers.

For schools that don’t use Zoom, other platforms with the breakout feature include GoToMeeting, Microsoft Teams, and RingCentral