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Making Remote Learning Engaging and Effective

Key Practices

by Laura Smith

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Making Remote Learning Engaging and Effective

Key Practices

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In spring 2020, districts across the country had to shift almost overnight from in-person school to remote learning. With no time for planning, teachers and students alike found remote learning challenging. For teachers, finding ways to engage students and deliver instruction effectively posed new and daunting challenges: replicating in-person lessons over Zoom did not translate well. For students, staring at a screen for hours and trying to absorb lessons was monotonous and difficult.

Fortunately, many lessons have been learned from last spring's experience. While we hope all districts will be back to in-person learning soon, districts and schools will have to be flexible and may have to pivot among remote, hybrid, and in-person instruction models this academic year. With this in mind, we have compiled, based on research and our reopening work with more than 70 districts over the summer, some key practices to help make learning impactful and engaging during periods of remote instruction.



1 To build meaningful teacher-student relationships, incorporate structured activities

Relationship building is much more challenging in a remote environment. Last spring, when school buildings shuttered and teachers and students had to shift to virtual instruction, relationships between teachers and students were already well established. But this year, many schools started the academic year in a remote or hybrid model; even for those that began the year in person, the possibility of remote learning looms.

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instructional time, districts need to take a similar prescriptive approach to relationship building between teacher and students during periods of remote learning. Some tactics that can be recommended to teachers include the following:

- Invite five students per week to a virtual breakfast or lunch group.
- Carve out 15 minutes twice a week for relationship-building activities. Districts should provide teachers with a sample list of activities to consider.
- Reach out to four to six families each week. Check in on how the family is doing and ask whether they have any particular concerns. Share feedback about their student.
- Post regular office hours and schedule students to attend at least once or twice each month.
- Survey students every other week on one thing they would like their teacher to “start, stop, keep, or change.”

2 Take the time to develop remote-learning norms and create an inclusive classroom culture

Last spring, pre-established norms and classroom culture were in place when classes shifted to remote learning. This academic year, it is important for teachers to take the time to develop classroom norms and create a classroom culture that will be enduring regardless of pivots among remote, hybrid, and in-person models. Teachers should intentionally involve students in the process as much as possible. Ideas for creating remote classroom norms and building an online classroom culture include the following:

- Work with students to develop remote-learning classroom norms. The teacher may guide the class in creating protocols for how they will use video, audio, or the chat feature.¹
- Organize classroom materials, activities, notes, homework assignments, or graded assignments, and keep this system consistent whether instruction is in person, hybrid, or remote.
- Create “remote-learning” roles that students can play to take ownership of their learning environment. Examples may include having a “Classroom DJ” who plays music before the lesson begins or designating a “Mood Monitor” who signals the teacher when it is time for a quick brain break.²

- Dedicate short periods to movement, stretching, and mindfulness to break up all of the screen time.
- Curate and publish student work to celebrate students’ accomplishments.³
- Develop “classroom logo” virtual backgrounds that students co-create. Having a common virtual background can help preserve student privacy and minimize the distraction of background activity.⁴

3 Prioritize clarity and organization on learning platforms

Effective teachers know that creating an organized classroom and providing clear instructions are staples of every effective classroom. These qualities are even more important in a remote-learning environment. Teachers should continue using the research-backed strategies that they utilize during in-person instruction in their remote classroom environment. For example, teachers should post frequent reminders when new assignments are released, proactively communicate upcoming due dates, and provide students with common expectations for their work.

However, unlike previous school years, students will also want and need more organization than is typically necessary in an in-person learning environment. Teachers may consider

- Intentionally organizing a place where students can find classroom materials, activities, notes, homework assignments, and graded assignments. This site should be kept consistent and updated frequently regardless of pivots among in-person, hybrid, or remote instruction models.
- Developing a weekly student-facing task list that maps out everything a student needs to do for each subject by day of the week (*Exhibit 1*).⁵
- Creating customized directions using short videos and audio recordings in addition to written instructions.⁶
- Establishing norms and a regular cadence of communication. It should be easy for students to understand when materials will be ready, how quickly they can expect feedback, and how and when to ask one-on-one questions.

Exhibit 1 SAMPLE WEEKLY STUDENT-FACING TASK LIST

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Math	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Join Zoom Lesson at 8:30 AM Complete problems 25-32 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Join Zoom Lesson at 8:30 AM 20 minutes of IReady 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Join Zoom Lesson at 8:30 AM Complete problems 4-26 (evens) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Join Zoom Lesson at 8:30 AM 20 minutes of IReady 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Join Zoom Lesson at 8:30 AM Complete math matching activity started in class
ELA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Join Zoom Lesson at 10 AM Daily journal Exit Ticket 9 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Join Zoom Lesson at 10 AM Daily journal Exit Ticket 10 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Join Zoom Lesson at 10 AM Daily journal Exit Ticket 11 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Join Zoom Lesson at 10 AM Daily journal Exit Ticket 12 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Join Zoom Lesson at 10 AM Daily journal Exit Ticket 13
Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Join Zoom Lesson at 1 PM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read pages 40-46 & take notes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Join Zoom Lesson at 1 PM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read pages 47-52 & take notes 	
SS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read Lady Liberty and post/reply to 2 discussion posts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Join Zoom Lesson at 1 PM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take Statue of Liberty Virtual Tour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Join Zoom Lesson at 1 PM 	
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work on self-portrait for art class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work on self-portrait for art class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work on self-portrait for art class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work on self-portrait for art class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Join Art Zoom Lesson at 3 PM

Source: DMGroup.

4 Leverage the capabilities of the remote instruction platform and use a variety of short segments to increase student engagement in synchronous learning sessions

Live, synchronous instruction can be the most impactful format for teaching new content or intervention; however, teachers should not simply try to replicate their traditional lessons and materials in an online setting. Long stretches of instruction are effective in person, but in an online setting, "Zoom fatigue" sets in fairly rapidly. Instead, lessons should be restructured so that live video-conferencing sessions are limited to 45 minutes.⁷ For the live lessons, teachers should leverage the capabilities of the remote platform to help make remote learning fun and different, and try breaking lessons into five-to-ten-minute segments alternating between modalities. Sample modalities include

- Student polls
- Breakout rooms for small-group discussions or turn-and-talks
- Videos
- Using the chat function as a way for students to respond to questions
- Activities that incorporate movement and stretching
- Having students share their screen and present/share to class
- Having students collaboratively create documents via Google Docs, assigning sections and roles to different students
- Providing time for students to complete work asynchronously



5 For elementary students, schedule shorter instructional blocks with a focus on direct instruction in the morning and follow up with small-group or independent practice in the afternoon

Remote schedules should define developmentally appropriate durations for instruction, particularly for younger students. The attention spans and engagement of students working independently and primarily on computers will be different from those of students in a traditional classroom setting. When developing the schedule, consider shortening blocks and adding more breaks throughout the day to help students maintain focus and stay on task while remote. Some schools are using the mornings to focus on direct instruction, and using the afternoons for students to join small groups or to independently complete practice assignments.

6 Develop a plan for students' asynchronous work that prioritizes choice and creation

Whether the model is hybrid or fully remote, students will likely be asked to complete asynchronous work. While many schools provided students with asynchronous work in the spring, most of it focused on task completion or filling in worksheets. Teachers or curriculum coaches should instead develop assignments that prioritize choice and creation rather than completion. The following types of assignments should be considered:

- Assignments that provide a variety of options and response formats that students can choose from to show their learning.
- Material that is relevant to situations or experiences students encounter outside of school to increase engagement in the assignment.⁸
- Assignments that provide structures and milestones to help students better manage their time and receive feedback as they learn. For example, building in checkpoints for students to submit their first or second drafts so the teacher can proactively provide feedback before the due date.
- An opportunity to create something rather than completing traditional summative assessments. For example, having students tackle project-based learning assignments, create short videos, or develop a lesson to teach the rest of the class.

7 Create a System for Grading, Assessing, and Providing Feedback on Student Work to Emphasize the Value of Remote Instruction and to Value Student Work

A major critique of remote instruction during the spring of 2020 was that students were disengaged and did not take coursework seriously. Student surveys revealed that many students at all grade levels inferred from the lack of grading, assessment, and feedback on homework that the remote instruction was not real, important, or necessary.

For remote instruction to be successful, a system must be in place to grade student work or provide feedback. Grading, while an imperfect mechanism, serves a variety of purposes including evaluating student work, motivating students to continue to learn and improve, and communicating how students have performed on tasks deemed of value in the learning process. Teachers may consider

- Providing frequent personalized feedback to students
- Recording video or audio feedback for the student to help clarify any frequent misconceptions the teacher is seeing
- Setting expectations for when students can receive feedback on their assignments
- Committing to replying to students' emails, calls, or texts within a set amount of time during the school day if the school is fully remote

Many of these key practices simply adapt to a remote-learning environment strategies that teachers have previously mastered. While the assignment turn-in bin may now look more like an attachment to an email, and turn-and-talks require a bit more coordination, the instructional foundation of building teacher-student relationships and adapting content to students' needs will still remain. Districts that work alongside teachers to focus on these key practices will help the school year be one to remember, for both its strong academics and its novelty. ♦

NOTES

¹ Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and John Hattie, "Distance Learning Up Close: Teaching for Engagement and Impact in Any Setting," webinar from Edweek, July 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vzHTAfjU0&feature=youtu.be>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Julie Kennedy and Christy Lundy, "Remote Start: Beginning the New School Year Virtually," Medium, July 30, 2020, <https://stories.chartergrowthfund.org/remotestart-beginning-the-new-school-year-virtually-12512a8e5a05>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Fisher, Frey, and Hattie, "Distance Learning."

⁷ Emma Dorn, Frédéric Panier, Nina Probst, and Jimmy Sarakatsannis, "Back to School: A Framework for Remote and Hybrid Learning amid COVID-19," McKinsey & Company, September 2, 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/back-to-school-a-framework-for-remote-and-hybrid-learning-amid-covid-19>.

⁸ Fisher, Frey, and Hattie, "Distance Learning."