TEACHER GUIDE
TO ONLINE LEARNING

MICHIGAN™ VIRTUAL

WIsconsin
Digital Learning Collaborative
Innovate. Collaborate. Educate.

INTRODUCTION

Michigan Virtual™ and the *Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute®* (*MVLRI®*) have produced a series of guides for those who provide support to students choosing to learn online: *The Parent Guide to Online Learning* (https://mvlri.org/resources/guides/parent-guide/), the *Student Guide to Online Learning* (https://mvlri.org/resources/guides/student-guide/), *Mentor Fundamentals: A Guide to Mentoring Online Learners* (https://mvlri.org/resources/guides/mentor-guide/), and the *Teacher Guide to Online Learning*, all of which are available as free downloads. The guides were written specifically for those who have little or no familiarity with online learning and who are interested in resources to help online learners be more successful.

The *Teacher Guide to Online Learning* is intended to support those new to teaching online. It is based on two *Michigan Virtual* courses: the first an orientation course for iEducators (new teachers who are recent graduates of Michigan teacher preparation programs who have been selected for a two-year digital learning teaching assignment with *Michigan Virtual*); and the second a Professional Learning Services course for online facilitators.

About Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute

In 2012, the Governor and Michigan Legislature passed legislation requiring *Michigan Virtual™*, formally *Michigan Virtual University®*, to establish a research center for online learning and innovation. Known as *Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute®* (*MVLRI®*), this center is a natural extension of the work of *Michigan Virtual*. Established in 1998, *Michigan Virtual's* mission is to advance K-12 digital learning and teaching through research, practice, and partnerships. Toward that end, the core strategies of *MVLRI* are:

- **Research** – Expand the K-12 online and blended learning knowledge base through high quality, high impact research;
- **Policy** – Inform local, state, and national public education policy strategies that reinforce and support online and blended learning opportunities for the K-12 community;
- **Innovation** – Experiment with new technologies and online learning models to foster expanded learning opportunities for K-12 students; and
- **Networks** – Develop human and web-based applications and infrastructures for sharing information and implementing K-12 online and blended learning best practices.

Michigan Virtual dedicates a small number of staff members to *MVLRI* projects as well as augments its capacity through a fellows program drawing from state and national experts in K-12 online learning from K-12 schooling, higher education, and private industry. These experts work alongside *Michigan Virtual* staff to provide research, evaluation, and development expertise and support.

About Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative

The Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative (WDLC) is a unique statewide partnership with a mission to "provide equitable access to high-quality online and blended learning resources throughout Wisconsin." This partnership results in every student in any school district having access to quality online and blended learning offerings. It also provides digital learning resources for teachers to use in their classrooms. Access to online courses, technology, and resources are available to districts through the WDLC regardless of size, geography, or learning model.

The WDLC consists of three collaborating organizations. The Wisconsin Virtual School (WVS) provides supplemental online courses, as well as, services to support the planning and implementing of digital initiatives to a large majority (200+) of the school districts across Wisconsin. The Wisconsin eSchool Network (WEN) is a consortium of 28 partners that provides access to online courses, technology, operational support, digital learning professional development, and other services to its members. Together, WEN and WVS form the foundation of the Collaborative. The third organization, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), provides quality assurance and helps raise awareness of WDLC. It also provides some fiscal support through the segregated universal service fund administered by the Wisconsin DPI.

In addition to the WDLC representing the digital learning interests of all districts, it also leverages shared knowledge and best practices to reduce costs. It offers a wide variety of resources, services, and benefits that districts need in order to offer online and blended learning options to students.

See the end of this report for a full list of WDLC district and affiliate partners.

About the Virtual Learning Leadership Alliance

The WDLC is honored to partner with the *Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute* as part of our collaborative partnership of the Virtual Learning Leadership Alliance (VLLA). With a commitment to quality the VLLA is an association of the chiefs of virtual programs that provides collegial support and collaborative opportunities to the individual members and member organizations to share resources, services, and expertise. This project is one of many collaborative projects related to the VLLA. The WDLC would like to thank the *Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute* for our partnership in studying our partner practices across Wisconsin.

Acknowledgments

The Teacher Guide to Online Learning would not have been possible without the guidance and valuable contributions from many experienced and dedicated professionals in the field of K-12 online learning. Special thanks to Michigan Virtual's Student Learning Services (SLS) leadership and the many authors of Michigan Virtual's iEducator course and Professional Learning Services online learning facilitation course whose expertise and experience helped direct the structure of this guide. Michigan Virtual lead instructors and other staff as well provided valuable feedback during the review of this resource.

We are especially indebted to the many Wisconsin online teachers who contributed their time, attitudes, artifacts, and expertise through personal interviews, group

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WHAT IS ONLINE LEARNING AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

A Working Definition of Online Learning

The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) describes online learning this way:

Online learning is characterized by a structured learning environment, to enhance and expand educational opportunities, providing instruction that is teacher-led, and may be synchronous (communication in which participants interact in the same time space such as videoconferencing) or asynchronous (communication that is separated by time such as email or online discussion forums), and accessed from multiple settings (in school and/or out of school buildings).

From A National Primer on K-12 Online Learning v.2

(http://www.inacol.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/iNCL_NationalPrimerv22010-web1.pdf)

Additional ways that online learning is being used in the K-12 space:

- expanding the range of courses available to students, especially in small, rural or inner-city schools, beyond what a single school can offer;
- providing highly qualified teachers in subjects where qualified teachers are unavailable;
- providing flexibility to students facing scheduling conflicts;
- affording opportunities for at-risk students, elite athletes and performers, dropouts, migrant youth, pregnant or incarcerated students, and students who are homebound due to illness or injury to continue their studies outside the classroom;
- providing credit recovery programs for students that have failed courses and/or dropped out of school, allowing them to get back on track to graduate;
- helping students that are currently performing below grade-level to begin catching-up through blended learning;
- addressing the needs of the millennial student;
- providing on-demand online tutoring;
- increasing the teaching of technology skills by embedding technology literacy in academic content; and
- providing professional development opportunities for teachers, including mentoring and learning communities.

Differences and Similarities

Although some educators believe that "anyone" can teach online or that it's easy, it takes a different skill set and practice to be a proficient online instructor. In fact, many profess that teaching online makes them an even better face-to-face teacher.

> *Whether the students are in front of you in a classroom or behind you in an email, they all have different personalities that you need to hone in on and work with to meet their learning needs.*
>
> **— Jon Oestreich, WI Virtual**

What are the similarities between face-to-face and online teaching?

- You are an expert in your field.
- You build relationships with students and create a learning community.
- You evaluate student performance through written assignments and assessments.
- You create supplemental resources for your students' needs.
- You seek to connect classroom lessons with the real world.

What are the differences between face-to-face and online teaching?

- Students will contact you individually.
- You develop relationships in a different way.
- There are more opportunities for individualization.
- Students will communicate with you and work on their courses at all hours.
- Students may begin the course at different times of the calendar year and not progress through the course all together at the same time, depending on the online learning program model.
- Students may have greater discretion concerning the order in which they complete their lessons so may skip around in online content and need to be redirected to go back and complete tasks, depending on the online learning program model.
- You may not physically see your students. Unless you use video conferencing, for example, communication will be primarily via email, the learning management system (LMS) message system, graded feedback, phone, texting, etc.
- The content is often already created for you, depending on the online learning program model.

Why Students Choose Online Learning

Students want to learn online for a variety of reasons. You may not know why your students are in your online course, but what brought them there has an impact on their motivation and often on their success. The Foundation for Blended and Online Learning along with Evergreen Education Group published a report based on surveys, focus groups, and interviews with students along with other data. _Why Students Choose Blended and Online Schools_ distinguishes three primary reasons students pursue online and blended learning (using both online and face-to-face learning in the same course): academics, social-emotional health and safety, and interests and life circumstances.

> *The online availability to curriculum and instruction adds the flexibility required for all students to be successful.*
>
> **— Ray Sperl, iForward**

Why Teachers Choose Online Teaching

Today's teachers have many reasons for entering the online learning environment. Many teachers choose online teaching for one or more of the following reasons:

- Life changes (pregnancy, young children, relocation, health concern(s), family concern(s), etc.) prevent them from working outside of their home;
- Their home location is in an area with an unreasonable commute to a school;
- They have a desire to be challenged with a new modality of teaching;
- They aspire to reach a wide demographic of students who are interested in a specialty area of learning that the teacher can provide;
- They've been encouraged to teach online by a school/district leader to expand their professional growth and experience or to participate in a district online program; and
- They are looking for more flexible hours or supplemental income.

> *I chose online teaching because it allows me to help a "forgotten" group of students AND staff that many do not understand*
>
> **— Janean Rannis, CAVE**

Whatever the reason, many teachers openly embrace this new challenge and find great satisfaction and success in this new teaching modality; however, new online teachers quickly learn that there are additional skills and knowledge required for this position. This guide is intended to provide new online teachers—or those exploring the possibility of teaching online—support in making that transition.

THE ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Despite the many positive aspects of online learning, certain hidden, unknown, and invisible forces that you may or may not be aware of can affect your ability to teach and your students' ability to learn in the online environment. As with any relationship or situation, the online learning environment presents challenges for both students and teachers.

Why Students Choose Blended and Online Schools—http://www.blendedandonlinelearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/FBOL-Why-Students-Choose-Blended-Online-Schools-Jan-2017.pdf

The Online Student

- Students come with various academic levels.
- Students come from a variety of backgrounds and have various life experiences.
- Students have various levels of technological ability, and their access to technology and the internet varies.
- Students are used to working in a very different educational environment and may not have all the skills required for successful online learning.
- Students probably have no previous experience with their online instructors.

We have students enter our program who might have otherwise just dropped out due a myriad of unique, sometimes very heartbreaking, reasons.

— David Parr, ARISE Academy

The Online Teaching and Learning Environment

Because of the asynchronous delivery of courses:

- Students may work at a different pace than the instructor.
- Students may work at a different pace than other students.
- Giving and receiving timely feedback can be a challenge.

It isn't always easy for an instructor to see:

- Evidence of learning,
- Evidence of struggle, or
- Evidence of understanding.

Students have ultimate control over their time and attention, therefore:

- How does the instructor help students stay engaged with their learning?
- How does the instructor help students become successful thinkers and learners?
- What are the limits of the instructor's ability to help students stay engaged and be successful thinkers and learners?

Recognizing these potential sources of friction can help a new and/or seasoned online teacher prepare positive solutions or employ methods to minimize or avoid these pitfalls and create a positive learning experience for everyone. This guide addresses these potential challenges while also providing numerous suggestions and best practices to make the online teaching and learning experience exciting and positive for instructors and students.

Your Online Work Environment

Being efficient in managing your time when working online may be the key to balancing your work and personal life. Prepare to be physically, digitally, and mentally organized so that you are not only efficient, but can enjoy that balance between work life and home life. Begin by securing a workspace conducive to being productive.

Tips for Organizing Your Physical Workspace

Tips for choosing your location:

- Set up a space that is separate from your family life and area.

- Choose a closed off space that will allow for quiet and privacy.

- Consider a door with a lock or a "do not disturb" sign if you live with others.

Design your space to allow you to minimize distractions and help you focus:

- Find a private space in your home (preferably with a door) that can be dedicated to your work as a teacher.

- Set up your computer in an area with good light. Lights should be directed toward the side of or behind your line of vision.

- Make sure you have high speed internet service with antivirus and malware protection software to protect you and your students' systems.

- Consider a desk you can raise and lower to avoid the negative health effects of sitting for long periods of time.

- Use a comfortable, supportive, and perhaps ergonomic chair as you will likely be sitting for long periods of time.

- Have computer paper, pens, and notebooks on hand.

- Do not slump or round your shoulders as fatigue will quickly set in.

- Consider using a foot rest that allows you to push back into your chair.

- Communicate proactively to those sharing your living space of the need to respect your workspace and work hours.

Because you will be spending the majority of your day working on a computer, repetitive motions such as wrist pain can be a common ailment. Your physical activity level will be reduced if you choose to sit most of the day, and eventually you may notice a negative impact on your energy level. You must carefully structure your remote work environment so that it is not only conducive to productivity, but is conducive to your health and welfare at the same time.

Get enough sleep, eat healthy, and exercise. This is sedentary work so rest your eyes, wrists, and back. Stretch periodically.

Physical work space will vary greatly depending on the individual, ongoing life circumstances and other occasional conditions. This flexibility can be one of the positives about online learning for teachers and students.

— Dawn Nordine, WI Virtual

Organizing Your Digital Space

Today millions of pieces of information bombard us at lightning speed. Just as you reduce chaos by organizing your physical workspace, you want to achieve the same goal of keeping your digital world organized. In order to relieve stress and be a more productive online teacher, it is essential for you to develop and maintain an organized digital workspace that promotes maximum efficiency and helps you locate files and items more readily.

Habits for a Productive Digital Workspace

Business experts offer these tips for making your digital workspace a productive place to work:

- Clear your virtual desktop. Get all those icons off the startup menu that makes your system run slower.

- Scan paper documents, when possible, and place them in folders.

- Use clear file names so you can easily retrieve them later. Alphabetize file names and be consistent in your filing system.
- Get the folders for all the classes you teach set up and organized as soon as possible.
- Archive emails in folders labeled with the course name and term.
- Create shortcuts on your desktop for programs, folders, and websites you use frequently.
- Create bookmarks for common internet sites.
- Use a calendar with deadlines and note priorities.

I use the available features of the LMS. This includes building up my personal e-folders where I can pull items from through the available digital library. I work to become proficient with the LMS so that I can help students keep themselves organized.

— Dana Breed, Stevens Point Area Online Learning Center

Organizing Your Email

Email will likely be the primary way you communicate with your students, their mentors, and parents/guardians. You likely already have years of experience using email, but using it as the primary means of communication for online instruction requires an organizational and workflow strategy conducive to this type of work. The better you are able to plan and stick to a solid email management strategy early on, the better you will be able to stay engaged with students and others on a daily basis. This is critical to establishing and maintaining good relationships with all those involved.

I am very organized, keeping track of all important dates within my Outlook Calendar. In the past couple of years I have converted my documents over to my Google Folder so I can continue to work on them from any place at any time. Keeping my inbox cleaned out each day is also important. I have several email folders so I can easily locate a message when needed.

Organizing Your Calendar

In addition to email management, schedule management is another tremendously important skill for an online teacher in order to stay in sync with everyone in your virtual environment. Scheduling and coordinating time to meet with your students, mentors, and colleagues and blocking out appropriate time to attend to your instructional duties all take place within your calendar. When used effectively, your calendar can be one of your best allies in making sure you stay on top of your schedule.

I like to use Screencast-o-matic, Jing, or Screencastify to create quick multi-media videos explaining the plans and expectations for the week ahead instead of just text based calendar models.

— Ray Sperl, iForward

Having an intentional and deliberate set of routines and boundaries while working from home will also allow you to be as productive and energized as possible:

- Maintain a routine
- Set a schedule
- Establish mental goals for the day
- Get dressed for work

Maintain a Healthy Life Balance and Manage Your Workload

Because we live in a "connected" world, there is a danger of not being able to disconnect from your work life, so it may interfere in other aspects of your personal life. A few helpful hints can assist you in avoiding these potential pitfalls and provide you with the healthy life balance.

- Create a manageable work schedule that clearly defines your working hours and non-working hours for your students, parents/guardians, and yourself. Be diligent in maintaining these working hours, and do not feel guilty about taking advantage of your non-working hours. Set boundaries. Clearly post your office hours in your course and on your webpage.

- Prioritize your tasks so the most important critical tasks are done first when your energy is the highest. Learn to say "No" to noncritical tasks. Map out weekly goals and to-do lists and put them where you can see them during your workday. Using electronic to-do lists can help keep you on track.

- Be sure to remain focused on and diligent about your designated work schedule when you are working. When you are "off," be sure to disconnect and do not feel guilty about not checking email or texts. Resist the tendency to work all of the time. Your personal time is just as valuable as your professional time. Do not feel guilty for leaving the work behind during your "down time," and help yourself by walking away from your electronic devices when you are "off."

- Give yourself a timeout to help you refocus your energies and reflect on the work ahead.

- Reach out for help when things get tough. Identify others at your school, via social media, or in an online professional learning network (PLN) who can provide support.

- Open separate email accounts, texting numbers, and other social media modes to balance your personal life with your professional life. This will help keep you from checking your course-related email and feeling like you need to react to student issues during your designated personal time.

Establish Professional Connections

Teachers can experience isolation just like their students do when they move away from a face-to-face environment. You can address the stress of feeling like you're all alone and on your own in several ways.

- Build relationships with fellow online teachers in your online school through chatrooms, video collaborations, phone calls, and other resources that allow for open and honest communication and sharing of ideas. Consider the EdWeb.net Community, the ISTE Standards Community, The Educator's PLN, Classroom 2.0, Teacher Square, and Twitter. These sites offer incredible opportunities to connect with other educators around the globe and to begin developing your own professional online identity.

- Ask questions and share best practice ideas with other teachers. Be open to sharing resources to enhance student learning. Often your colleagues can be your best resource.

- Actively engage in professional development opportunities and professional learning communities.

I intentionally close my computer down at the end of the day and do not return to it until the next morning. I have found that I do more successful work when I allow myself to be with my family on my off days and avoid working during that time.

I have learned to juggle and do the best with the hours I have. I accept that I can't be perfect in any aspect of my life, but I can do my best with what I have available. I know it is a given to have challenges, but it is also a given to have successes, too.

— Dana Breed, Stevens Point Area Online Learning Center

I quickly learned that I needed to set up a routine for reading assignments, grading, responding to emails, and addressing gaps that I see students having in the class.

— Jon Oestreich, WI Virtual

Setting a Daily Routine

Having a plan of attack for the day will help you mentally prepare for the day's events. Below is a common routine that successful online instructors have used to manage their time efficiently.

Daily Instructor Tasks

- Check and answer email.
- Compose a weekly group email to the entire class via the LMS message function. For the first week, request a response to ensure your messages are received and get students started interacting with you via email.
- Check and answer messages within the LMS.
- Grade student work.
- Make phone calls to parents/guardians, mentors, and students to build support for helping the student be successful.
- Send regular updates to parents/guardians and mentors.
- Track student progress.
- Help students learn time management skills through use of any pacing elements available in your course.
- Make expectations clear.
- Reach out to a PLN or colleagues to seek the wisdom of those who have lived and breathed online teaching before you.

I plan for teaching much like I would for a brick and mortar session. During the day, I make sure that all resources are uploaded and ready in the [platform] for the live lesson session, then grade any previously turned in assignments, and then check emails from students...this is repeated several times each day.

— Ray Sperl, iForward

Establishing Classroom Rules and Procedures

Making your classroom expectations clear from the onset of class will save time and energy down the road. Remember that many of your students are new to the online learning environment, so you will have to guide them in terms of appropriate behavior, your expectations, and protocols required in your classroom.

Providing structure to your classroom helps eliminate stress on students. Help provide them that structure so they can become independent, disciplined learners. Ultimately, you also want to create a safe learning environment, one that is conducive to learning and in which students are respectful of the online instructor and each other.

I keep our classroom rules positive, short, and to the point.

1. *Participate Enthusiastically*
2. *Work to the Best of Your Ability*
3. *Be Honest and Let Your Personality Shine*
4. *Use Encouraging and Positive Language*
5. *Ask Questions and Communicate Effectively.*

These rules are always posted on the course homepage and listed as a box in my weekly newsletter. It keeps everyone focused and acts as a constant reminder of my expectations.

Classroom Rules

1. Establish a consistent method and format for submitting assignments within the LMS. Emailing assignments outside of the LMS classroom is not a good practice. Some LMSs time and date stamp each individual student assignment, validating that it was submitted and when. There will be instances when parents/guardians refute a claim that their student did not submit an assignment. The LMS usually contains a course database that collects all login data, click information, amount of time spent in certain areas of the course, and course assignment submission logs to provide individual student data.

2. Do not accept assignments until students learn to submit them correctly in the first few modules. Make this a teachable moment. Students and parents/guardians may push back, but the goal is to make students accountable for their own learning, and that goes hand-in-hand with having a disciplined approach in following the classroom rules and procedures. Consider some practice activities before getting into the modules themselves. Mentors, also known as coaches or local education guides (LEG), may already be working with students on these kinds of new skills.

3. Make directions clear. Provide an additional tutorial if need be to clear up any confusion about what is required. Explain the assignment in a different manner, use screenshots, make a video, provide an audio recording or even meet in real time with the student via the LMS or a Google Hangout, for example, to clear up any misunderstandings in how to proceed. Simple but complete rubrics can help to clarify expectations and provide clear concise directions.

Basic Tasks for Reaching Every Student Successfully

Start of Course

- *Reach out to students who haven't started the course, as well as the mentors and parents/guardians of those students, at least twice before drop deadline.*
- *Learn how to pronounce students' names, or find out what nicknames they prefer to use.*
- *Bond with the student so they see you as a real person who is there to help them.*
- *Create a personal welcome in the course LMS, and introduce yourself to students.*
- *Make navigational materials readily available.*
- *Make fun videos to keep students engaged and interested.*
- *Reach out to students who haven't gotten started.*
- *Provide quick turnaround of assignments while material is fresh in students' minds.*
- *Make contact just to see how students are doing.*
- *Build relationships with online learners' mentors.*
- *Call students who have not completed the first unit of work for a phone conference.*

Mid-Course

- *Contact students who are lagging behind.*
- *Encourage students not to give up.*
- *Acknowledge bright spots.*
- *Set up times to meet to discuss challenges.*
- *Provide "re-navigation" to get back on pace.*
- *Start talking about end of course date several weeks in advance.*
- *Acknowledge the time crunch: Send out calendars with remaining weeks for students to re-organize the remaining work and make a plan for completion.*
- *Create a course countdown.*
- *Verify when students' schools need their grades, and create custom end dates as needed.*
- *Maintain a high level of encouragement to complete the course well.*
- *Get grades in as soon as possible once students finish the course.*
- *Ask for student feedback at end of each unit.*

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE ONLINE TEACHER

Relationship Building

One distinguishing feature of online learning is that all interactions must be sought out intentionally and supported. Online learning environments do not have the affordance of natural social opportunities that fully face-to-face environments do. Online facilitators don't have the ability to read body language, see students visibly struggling, or informally build rapport with a "How's it going?" check in. We must develop and refine instruments that aide the teacher in engaging with students in ways that promote deep learning fellowship.

Creating a human-to-human bond with your online students, as well as with their parents/guardians and the student's local online mentor, is critical in determining student success in your online course. This can be accomplished through effective individual and group communication, encouraging engagement in the course, productive and growth-focused feedback, and multiple opportunities for students to ask questions and learn in a way that is meaningful to them.

The Adolescent Community of Engagement (ACE) Framework focuses on areas of student, teacher, and parent involvement that can deepen relationships within online courses that will foster both safety and learning. See The Adolescent Community of Engagement Framework: A Lens for Research in K-12 Online Learning Environments for more information.

https://goo.gl/dCgSrq

Communication

Effective communication promotes an effective learning environment, whether face-to-face or online, and is arguably the most important (as well as most frequent) activity online instructors engage in. Communication can make or break your students' experience.

> *Communication skills are the most important teaching skills and instrumental to becoming a successful online instructor. In fact, effective and positive communication skills may be more important than instructor content knowledge. Communication is the make-it or break-it key to letting students know that we are real people who care about their success.*
>
> **— Jon Oestreich, WI Virtual**

Why Is Communication Important?

We know that how a student feels about learning greatly affects the student's retention and performance in a particular subject, so we want students to feel positive about as many aspects of their learning environment as possible. Unlike in the face-to-face learning environment, in some programs, teachers simply do not control many aspects of the online environment, for example, which LMS is used, the look and feel of the course, the specific course content, and in many cases, how the student work is graded. However, you do have control over a foundational element in students' online experiences: communication.

The number one key to being a great online teacher is to be an excellent communicator. You do not need to be an extrovert to be a good communicator; instead, you need to have an online relationship with someone. You can be an introvert and have a huge impact on your students through your computer.

Creating a human bond with your online students is critical in determining their success in your online course. It takes skill, time, energy, and heart to build a professional academic relationship with each and every student and maintain the positive connection throughout the course that contributes to their success. As a facilitator of online learning, you will quickly realize that you simply cannot leave anything unsaid.

Setting the Tone

In your online course, you will want to be the first one to communicate because you are responsible for setting the tone for the type of experience students will have. The first contact is when and where that begins. An instructor must take a number of actions to officially welcome students, mentors, and parents/guardians to the online experience.

Welcome Letter

I start the course with a welcome letter and a few pictures of me in a casual environment. This helps my students see me as a real person, not just 26 letters behind a keyboard. I keep it light in tone but am sure to layout my expectations, office hours, and any other pertinent information they may need to know.

Instructors should send their students and the mentors who work with those students a welcome letter containing at least the following:

- Instructor contact info
- Office hours
- Course start and end dates
- Course requirements and expectations
- A professional-looking instructor picture

Keep in mind that your students and others involved in their support will see you as a real individual if you share information about yourself, including your interests and outside activities. Each recipient requires different consideration.

Students

As you compose your first communication, consider the following:

- Kick off the learning experience with a positive and professional message. Show that you are excited to work with the student and that you are approachable.
- Post the letter in the course info area of your LMS and in the announcements area, too.
- Send the welcome letter within five business days of the start of the course or within five business days of a student joining the course. Remember to send the letter to each new student who adds once the term starts.

As you create these opening communications, keep in mind how you want students to feel the minute they sign into your classroom. In addition to a welcome letter, video announcements are an opportune way to personalize your course. Remember, announcements are students' first impression of you, your teaching style, and your presence in the course itself.

At the beginning of a term, you will have many students to welcome. You may wish to set up a list (such as a class roster spreadsheet) to indicate that you have sent a welcome to each student and mentor. As the term progresses, more students may be enrolled. You can add them and their mentors to the spreadsheet, too. Some instructors gather other info on these same sheets from the students' letter of introduction and exchanges with mentors, essentially creating a database about their students for easy reference.

The first assignment in my online class is for the students to read my welcome letter and then respond with their own brief introduction. This serves a dual purpose: I get to know each student and their interests, and I can assess their understanding of the classroom discussion board and submitting assignments.

Parents

It is also a good idea to send a letter of introduction to the parents/guardians, if possible, because they are a very important and often over-looked member of the students' support system. This is your first chance to establish positive contact. Remember that they may not understand anything about the online course and may not even know their student is taking an online course. Encourage them to contact you with any questions or concerns and supply all your contact information so they can communicate using the method of their choice. Be sure to let them know that the student has a mentor at their school and who the mentor is if you can. Contact the parents/guardians at least one additional time during the course to share something positive about their student.

I send a welcome letter to both the student and the parent introducing myself. I briefly share my interests outside the classroom, provide my contact information and office hours, and offer other pertinent information about the class. Even if I do not make voice contact with the parents/guardians, I like knowing that I have reached out to them and let them know I am available to help in any way.

Mentors

The mentor's role is to support the students in their online learning experience. Schools approach this position differently, but mentor responsibilities often include everything from getting a student enrolled to keeping students on pace to dealing with LMS challenges. Mentors often referred to as local education guides (LEGs) and coaches, often act as a liaison between students and their teachers and help students learn to learn online. They are critical to student success and to helping students stay engaged and on pace.

• Introduce yourself to the mentors and send a copy of your introduction and student welcome letter to them.

• Email one student welcome letter to each mentor so the mentor is aware of what the students have received from you so they can reinforce your expectations and directions. Personalize each letter by indicating the students' first and last names as well as which course they are in. Many times mentors oversee many students, and it will help establish good rapport with mentors for you to specify which of their students are in your course.

• Work with the mentors to understand what may be impeding a student's progress, diffuse tense situations, break down communication barriers, or address other unique situations that develop.

• Discuss student progress with mentors to keep them informed of the students' work—and vice versa.

If your course contains password-protected tests, consider having a separate mentor welcome letter and student welcome letter. Include the passwords in the mentor letter but not in the student letter. The mentors will thank you!

Announcements

The main way you will communicate with your class as a whole is through announcements. The announcements page serves as the homepage for your course; it's always the first thing that students see when they come to class. The announcements are like a timeline that stays open throughout the semester. Students will be able to see the current week's announcement and all previously released announcements, so remind them to check that area of the LMS regularly.

I try to keep my announcements fun, comical, and encouraging. I also incorporate polling tools into my announcements to give students the opportunity to voice their thoughts on topics outside of the content addressed. This allows them to have fun conversations about things they may be interested in.

Tools to Enhance Announcements

There are many tools that you can use to present information through announcements. Not every tool is appropriate for every type of announcement, but consider using one or more of these tools when providing supplemental information, a personal introduction, or an important reminder for your class.

- **Animoto**—Create videos from images, great for a personal intro video.
- **Jing** or **Camtasia Relay**—Create simple screenshots or videos to present an alternative explanation of content for students.
- **YouTube** or **TeacherTube**—Share an inspirational or helpful video to supplement the course content.
- **Keynote**, **PowerPoint**, or **Google Slides**—Create your announcement as a visually-appealing slide, save it as an image file (.jpeg, .gif, etc.), and upload it as an image in announcements.
- **Pixton** or **ToonDoo**—Create a comic strip to illustrate a concept or provide a reminder of course policy.
- **PowToon**—Produce an animated video to communicate important information.

Announcements are an opportunity to personalize your course and customize the experience for your students. Share your passions and provide helpful supplemental materials according to students' needs. Make the announcements page an area that students are drawn to—consider how to keep it interesting so that they will read, listen to, and view the important messages you are communicating to them. Include images and video where helpful, but be sure to abide by principles of Copyright and Fair Use (see page 30).

Format your text in helpful ways, such as using bold, various text sizes, colors, and highlighting to demonstrate the most important elements of your message. At the same time, too much of these techniques can make your announcement seem unprofessional. It can also end up being distracting or hard to navigate. Try to use formatting as a visual way to capture students' attention and highlight important aspects without being distracting and keeping accessibility guidelines in mind. The best announcements strike a balance between attractive formatting, inspiration, and helpful information that together enhance the students' experience in your course.

I send out a Sunday Announcement Update each week in my online class. These allow me to give praise to the efforts of specific students or the class as a whole, provide tips or additional resources to enhance prior learning, and share an overview of what will be discussed in the upcoming week.

The Purdue Online Writing Lab – OWL – provides an overview of Visual Rhetoric, or how visual images communicate meaning. https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/691/01/

Post a minimum of one announcement per week containing at the least a reminder of that particular week's pacing goals and a motivational message or supplemental content.

Make it as easy as possible for students to access any resource you include in your announcement. Post a live hyperlink or embed it within the announcement. If you use an image, size it appropriately so the content may be viewed easily but it doesn't take up the majority of the screen.

Individualized Communication
(email, messages, phone, and texting)

Much of your communication as an online instructor will be highly individualized personal email or phone calls to a student, mentor, or parent. Each time we communicate individually with another person, we are sending multiple messages—some intended and some not intended. It is a common saying that 90% of communication is nonverbal, such as body language, tone, the timing of the response, and the method of the response. Since much of our online communication is lacking body language and often tone of voice, it is crucial that we pay close attention to our delivery techniques.

As teachers, we have the privileged position of modeling a personal, polite, positive, and professional communication style for our students to emulate. This is particularly important because most students do not have much experience with or understanding of netiquette.

See On the Same Page on page 35 for a form used by teacher Caitlyn Skinner from Montana Digital Academy to learn more about her students and improve communication.

Consider the Four "P's" of good communication:
personal, polite, positive, and professional.

Personal

Whether communicating via phone, email, or in person, show the recipients—mentors, students, parents/guardians—that you are interested in their well-being and are happy to serve them. Use the person's name, and try to foster relationships whenever possible.

I start my email using the student's preferred name, just as I would if we were in a face-to-face setting. This is a small act that can make a huge impact on building a relationship with each student.

Polite

It's important to remember that—like you—the person on the other side of the screen has joys and trials and everything in between. As in a face-to-face environment, you will have tense moments of communication. It's

not a matter of "if," it's a matter of "when." Resolve to treat the person with respect and dignity even when you feel you aren't receiving the same treatment. Never respond in a way that could be interpreted as curt or rude. This can be more challenging when you do not have the advantage of seeing body language and facial expressions.

> *When I receive an email from a frustrated student or parent, I do not respond immediately. I give myself permission to wait several hours to construct a well-worded, positive response. This also allows me, when needed, to contact the student's mentor or another professional that may have an alternative insight to the situation to give the student the best possible, positive, and polite response.*
>
> **— Annette Walaszek, Wisconsin Virtual School**

Positive

Keep a friendly "I am on your side" tone to all communication. Let your positivity influence those around you. It's likely your students will experience some negativity during their online learning experience, whether it's confusion over course content, difficulty navigating the course, or struggles with time management. Each point of contact with you should leave a positive impression. How students feel about their learning has a huge impact on the overall effectiveness of their learning experience. As you know from face-to-face experiences, one negative point of contact can do damage that is very difficult to reverse, and it's all the more difficult to detect when you can't see the individual's reaction. One personal, positive communication with you can completely stabilize the experience.

> *The tone of an email is critical. No matter what the situation, I am always going to assume the best of each situation and avoid anything that might sound accusatory or judgmental.*
>
> **— Annette Walaszek, Wisconsin Virtual School**

Professional

Proofread and revise your communication in order to attain a professional tone and level of quality. Read the message out loud to yourself to hear how it sounds. Once you hit the "send" button, it cannot be taken back. Check for typos, lack of clarity, and areas of potential misunderstanding. Avoid sarcasm as it does not translate well in online communication. Never use slang, texting lingo, or all caps. Model appropriate grammar and mechanics; for example, follow capitalization rules and use proper punctuation. Above all, maintain a tone that communicates value for the other person.

> *I use email to teach students how to write clear and concise emails so that both the teacher and the student understand each other.*
>
> **— Ray Sperl, iForward**

The same suggestions about formatting announcements (see page 16) applies here, e.g., using bold, italics, color, etc., to demonstrate the most important parts of your message.

> *I quickly learned never to use red to emphasize a word or phrase in an email. Although red grabs attention, it is almost always seen as negative or scolding. Green or blue are my best font color choices when I feel I need to highlight with color.*

Finally, one of the greatest challenges of individualized communication is ensuring that the message you are sending is the message the student, the parent/guardian, or the mentor is receiving. Since your facial expressions and body language are not visible to your students, the tone you establish in your messages must be clear to avoid misinterpretation.

> *Responding to an email as soon as it comes in almost never seems to be a good idea. I give myself some "think time"—anywhere from 10 minutes to four hours, even if the initial email is positive. This allows me to consider my words carefully, ask advice if necessary, and make sure my tone is positive, or at least neutral, so as to not be interpreted wrong.*

Phone Communication

Phone communication with a student or mentor is just as appropriate—if not more appropriate—and more efficient at certain times. Often a simple phone call can clear up a lot of confusion, and a live conversation can allow for a much quicker and clearer resolution to a detailed issue than several back-and-forth emails. Just pick up the phone and call. The same basic principles of the Four Ps — personal, polite, positive, and professional — apply. Remember to document phone conversations, too, noting date, time, subject, and any important details.

> *Caution: Some issues may warrant the precision and clarity of written communication. Email and messages from the LMS and your work-related email create a paper trail which can be referenced later if needed.*

> *In the first week of each course, I set a goal to contact each student and parent by phone to introduce myself, give them a voice to my name, and prove that I am not a robot. This one action has made a significant difference in the positive relationship connection I develop with my students throughout the rest of the course.*

> *Although I engage in email, I find that a large portion of my day is making check-in phone calls to students, parents, and mentors. I want to establish a relationship immediately, let these students and parents know I care, and find ways that I can help each of these students succeed.*
>
> **— David Parr, ARISE Academy**

Texting

Some students—and parents/guardians—prefer to communicate via text. Meet students where they are comfortable and likely to engage in communication, but always keep the Four Ps in mind. Many instructors have realized the sheer power of harnessing the most accessible and comfortable format for students. Some instructors, upon giving out a number for texting, start hearing regularly from students who have rarely (if ever) made contact previously.

> *Some instructors have set up a Google Voice account to use for texting with students. This way, you don't have to give out your personal cell number. Texts can be routed directly to your Gmail account and you can respond to them on any device you wish. See (https://voice.google.com/) for more information on Google Voice.*

I have a separate work text number that I give to all my students to use. Throughout the week, I send random short messages of praise or encouragement to select students, reminding them that I am truly an advocate for their success. I can also be a bit more casual in this form of communication, allowing me to send positive emojis or gif's to enhance my message.

Learn the students' communication preference—email, LMS messages, texting, or phone. You can collect this information using a Google form, for example. Note preferences where you can access them efficiently, a student roster spreadsheet, for example, and use them when you contact your students.

Guidelines for Facilitating a Class Discussion

Many online courses also have discussion activities in which students post comments in an asynchronous discussion board within the LMS. Some of these discussion activities are very simple (such as providing an objective response), whereas others include providing carefully-written responses that demonstrate mastery of complex concepts.

Many students see discussion boards as a hoop to jump through to earn points. An instructor's goal in discussion activities is to facilitate the conversation to keep it moving in the intended direction. An instructor's presence in the discussion board keeps students engaged in the content and classroom community. Take care not to be too involved. It is not necessary to reply to each post, but be mindful of responding to every student regularly. You will want to demonstrate principles of polite, professional communication while affirming and correcting students' understanding of the concept at hand. Please keep in mind that all posts, both yours and the students', are public, so any comments made on the discussion board should be positive while you prompt and facilitate the conversation. Any individual feedback for students should be made in the grade book feature of the LMS and kept private.

I use the "feedback sandwich" when facilitating class discussions. To build a meaningful discussion, I start with saying "I really liked how you did this but have you considered (enter idea here)." Then I tell the students that they can obtain extra points if they email me a response to this idea within a certain timeframe. This tends to keep the discussion going and build in higher level thinking skills that meet their level of growth.

- Provide a model response in the general discussion instructions/rubric initially to show students what you expect.

- Adhere to the same standards of behavior online as you would face-to-face. Be honest, respectful, and polite.

- Take time to think about your response before you begin typing. Re-read it before you post it. Be brief but clear and concise. If you would like to share a long article, post the URL and citation for it.

- Move the discussion forward by adding to or expanding on comments already made.

- Always monitor online discussions and contribute when appropriate. Your presence will help maintain positive expectations for student behavior, circumventing instances of inappropriate comments or bullying.

- Link to prior knowledge or make personal connections.

- Ask clarifying questions to encourage students to dig deeper into their understanding of a concept.

- Incorporate key terms and other vocabulary from the content.

- Encourage students to support their opinions by linking back to the lesson content or citing their sources.

- Teach students that if they agree or disagree with a comment, they should state why.

- Teach students to evaluate the validity of arguments.

- Use the online discussion as a tool to challenge students' thinking and help the group generate new or expanded ideas.

- Avoid generalizations about entire groups of people, including racial, ethnic, religious, gender, sexual preference, or other stereotypes.

- Provide grading rubrics for discussion board posts that include all expectations and examples of moving the discussion forward.

Communication Through Social Media

From the golden days of MySpace to the explosion of Facebook, teachers continually explore new methods to interact, engage, and communicate with their students that seem most comfortable to them. As fast as these modes of communication are changing, so are novel ways for using them.

Understanding that this generation is driven by social media, I created a private YouTube and Facebook page that I share with my students only. I create videos, upload funny or motivational pictures, post announcements or upcoming events, and give "shout outs" to students using this medium to make a more personal connection with my students.

Caution: While it's obvious that there are a lot of benefits to using various social media platforms in the classroom, there are also many things that teachers must consider and be aware of when integrating these resources into their learning environments.

- Get student permission before using names.
- Never share student grades or other personal information.
- Have parents/guardians sign a release form at the start of the year for sharing student images, names, video, and/or work.
- Avoid sending personal messages to students in social media.
- Create a specific classroom/teacher account for sites like Snapchat and Instagram.

ENGAGING STUDENTS

Were you a student who excitedly raised your hand to answer a teacher's question, or did you avoid the attention? The online learning environment can increase the likelihood of students' responses, whether they are extroverts or introverts. Online instructors can influence student engagement and bring back enthusiasm for learning or inspire it for the first time.

> *The online learning environment allows every student to have a "voice" in the classroom, ultimately enriching the learning from multiple perspectives.*
>
> **— Erik Hanson, Appleton eSchool**

Motivating Learners

Think back to the aura of excitement during the first day of the school year. If we can capitalize on this excitement in the initial impressions of our online courses, we can tap into a student's intrinsic motivation to learn.

> *Motivation depends on a student's personality. Quiet students often share their voices more in an online culture because they feel comfortable and not like the spotlight is on them. I typically individualize this motivation in my personal feedback and emails and use bitmojis to add a little fun and excitement.*

Motivation is an emotion or desire within a person that causes the person to take action. People will usually take action for one primary reason: to achieve a goal. People motivate themselves; we are not able to motivate others. However, as teachers and online facilitators, we can influence motivation through the learning environment we create. We can encourage and support students and contribute to their motivation through tangible extrinsic rewards for a job well done or more personal intrinsic rewards that will propel a student to push forward and succeed. In the field of brain-based research, studies show that providing a learning environment that is safe—where students feel comfortable taking risks and sharing their thoughts—promotes learning.

> *Do you run a "not yet" classroom? Consider Carol Dweck's Growth Mindset research as portrayed in her TED Talk. In a "not yet" classroom, we create an environment where it is acceptable for students to make mistakes, use initial failures to learn more, and see the experience as a growth opportunity.*
> *https://www.ted.com/talks/carol_dweck_the_power_of_believing_that_you_can_improve*

ASSESSMENT

You are an educator, so by the very nature of your profession, you want to help others succeed. Assessment is a powerful tool to support student growth and promote success in an online environment.

Consider these strategies for assessment as an online facilitator:

- Offer feedback on student written work in Google Docs (via comment feature), connected to task learning objectives, during their drafting process.
- Embed short quizzes in between new learning modules to help you and students understand where they are and where they need to be before moving forward.
- Set up a discussion board where students reflect on their learning and you respond with both acknowledgments of evidence of their learning as well as questions to extend their thinking.
- Be familiar with school or district guidelines for proctoring assessments and final exams and be prepared to fulfill this role if necessary.

Online classes allow for many different ways to assess students. They are not only tested on their expressive skills with special assignments where they create a script and sign it but also a midterm and final where they must put together all the materials and use all the skills they have learned throughout the course. I use discussion boards, quizzes, and practice assignments to formatively assess how the students are doing and pinpoint areas for further instruction.

Grading and Feedback

Grading, providing feedback, and the communication that accompanies these two tasks are probably where online instructors spend 90% of their time and energy. It's also difficult to describe grading and feedback as a discrete activity, as they incorporate so many facets of teaching: relationship building, coaching, instructing, correcting, redirecting, encouraging, communicating with various stakeholders, and more.

One thing that many online instructors appreciate about the online format is that they are freed up from daily lesson planning and content delivery because the courses often already contain those elements. Instead, they can spend their time and energy individually coaching each student. This coaching role is manifested in the activities surrounding grading and feedback.

Meaningful Feedback

How can we stimulate our online learners to be actively engaged in class throughout the academic term? Beyond an enthusiastic warm welcome letter, interesting and helpful announcements, and encouraging participation in class discussions, grading and feedback can effectively result in students feeling motivated.

Components of Meaningful Feedback

The acronym REPLY is a practical way to organize the key components of quality online feedback on assignments and assessments:

- **R=Responsive**—Provide a timely response to student questions.
- **E=Effective**—Offer specific comments aligned to the assignment's objectives.
- **P=Positive**—Use words that give off a positive connotation.
- **L=Learning**—Include suggestions for how the assignment can be improved.
- **Y=You**—Make it personal and not just a standard response.

R = Responsive.

Instructors should establish, publicize, and maintain expectations for grading and providing feedback for student assignment submissions. Timely feedback is critical because students may have forgotten what they submitted if the feedback takes too long. The idea behind timely feedback is to capture and use the students' connection to their work while they still care about it. Capitalize on the students' interest in the work before they move on in the course. Timely feedback also allows the student to incorporate that feedback into future work in the course.

E = Effective.

At best, an instructor reflects back to students a realistic picture of their progress. Therefore, feedback should be very specific. Make comments that speak to the assignment's objectives, keeping in mind the context of what the student has been learning throughout the course. If your course incorporates the use of rubrics, use them to assess the students work. Avoid general, broad comments such as "Good job."

P = Positive.

Feedback should not be merely corrective. Always acknowledge when the student is making an effort and what the student is doing well so that they continue with those behaviors. Make sure you maintain a positive tone throughout your writing. Read (and reread) your comments to assure that a positive tone is maintained, even if the nature of your feedback may be primarily corrective.

L = Learning.

Expand the learning opportunity for students. Point out a few suggestions for improving the assignment. Fill in any perceived gaps in student understanding. At the same time, don't overwhelm the student (and yourself) by pointing out every little thing that can be improved. Make your feedback positive, helpful, and memorable by focusing on a limited number of attainable improvements for the student to consider. Provide an opportunity for growth by allowing students to learn from your feedback and try the assignment again. Remember, an environment in which students feel safe to try alleviates the highly motivational fear of failure. Learning when they understand failing is a positive aspect of learning and it's okay to take risks as a way to move forward. The goal is for students to master the content, not simply move on in the course.

Y = You (Personal).

Personal feedback helps you build a relationship with each student. Students who feel you care about them and their success are more likely to be successful. Use greetings and closings. Use their name. It makes the students feel valued and communicates that you are speaking specifically to them, not using a canned response.

If I was in the face-to-face classroom, I would be walking around and supporting students by answering questions and guiding their work. The online environment doesn't allow for me to do this as easily, so I allow my students to submit most of their assignments in draft form first and receive growth-focused feedback from me. Then they have the option of redoing their work for a final grade within a designated timeframe. This is my way of providing "on the spot" guidance in an online forum and continuously encouraging best efforts.

— Jon Oestreich, WI Virtual

Other Types of Meaningful Feedback

Praise and Encouragement

Much of your instructional tasks are reactive, such as answering emails and grading assignments. However, the skilled teacher will be proactive, reaching out to students when instructor contact can be helpful and taking time to celebrate student achievement.

Consider making a quick phone call or email each week to encourage one or two students who have done an outstanding job on their coursework, have shown sound character, or who have made solid steps to improve their progress. Or, highlight excellent student work each week in an announcement and display the example for other students to see so that they have a good model. You could schedule a task like this into your online calendar as a recurring appointment so that you're reminded to do it each week. Such tasks do not take long, yet they may yield great results in terms of encouraging students to continue their focus and stay on pace. This type of activity also helps to strengthen the teacher-student relationship, which in turn becomes an important element in the students' motivation to learn.

Many students know that if they are struggling, a teacher will reach out to help. However, most students are not expecting a phone call or email from a teacher when they are doing something well. I find that praising students for a job well done is just as important as reaching out to the struggling students for help; therefore, I try to recognize the good work and efforts of at least three students each week.

Redirection and Clarification

While grading student work, you may find that students are missing some key knowledge or skills needed to succeed in a lesson. Perhaps they are missing essential prior knowledge, there is an academic integrity issue, or they seem to have some real difficulties in navigating the online course.

In situations like these, mere feedback isn't enough. Don't let a situation like this continue for long. Pick up the phone or open your email and reach out to the mentor and student. When you take the initiative to reach out to the mentor and student to address the issue early, it's much more likely that the student will have a successful and enjoyable experience in your course.

I do my best to provide detailed feedback on any graded assessment.

— Dana Breed, Stevens Point Area Online Learning Center

When I provide feedback, I encourage my students to respond back, even if it is a short message confirming they received my message. If I do not hear back within two days, I find an alternative way to communicate my message to the students to ensure that they received my feedback and answer any questions they have. This also shows the students that I am committed to helping them succeed and builds trust in our relationship.

Schedule regular time during your week to look for students who may be behind or skipping lots of assignments. Reach out to them. Document that you reached out, and schedule a follow-up call in a week to see if they have progressed. Contact their mentors to alert them to your action and enlist their support. They may be aware of extenuating circumstances the students have not shared, too.

MEETING SECONDARY STUDENTS' SPECIAL NEEDS

While the one-size-fits-all approach is still prevalent in many educational settings and may be what most students experience, online options can be very personalized, and there are many technology enhancements that assist students in learning.

504s and IEPs

Even though most student-centered educators truly believe that all students can learn, they are quick to add the caveat that all students do not learn at the same pace, time, or in the same manner. The entire gamut of online learners will arrive within your online classes, from gifted and talented learners to those with severe learning disabilities. Understanding the struggles of those with disabilities or extreme challenges can be a life altering paradigm shift in terms of how we apply our knowledge and instructional strategies to assist them.

IEP and 504 Learners: Speaking the Same Language

Some terminology often used in IEPs and 504 plans may not be familiar to many teachers.

Accommodation: makes the work accessible, but does not substantially change the work, e.g., testing in a separate setting, reading the text aloud, reduced amount of work, etc.

Modification: the subject matter is changed by being significantly below grade level or changing what the test measures. By making modifications based on the student's IEP you are leveling the playing field, making it possible for those students to have the same chance of success as students without IEPs.

Differentiation: planning instruction based on individual student interests, needs, and abilities to include students with disabilities, gifted, etc. The instructor may, for example, provide real life problems, create a new assignment, focus on visuals, use current events, create movies, review games, or use flash cards as instructional strategies.

IEPs: the Individual Education Plan is written by the local school. The committee includes parents/guardians, administrators, support personnel, and other student advocates. The plan identifies modifications to be made based upon the student's abilities and limitations.

IEPs are identified by the school district or mentor in my online program. I keep a separate, private worksheet of the student and his/her accommodations. When I use one of these noted accommodations, I make sure to note this with a date and short description of the accommodation in my worksheet to keep accurate records for future reference.

When we have a student with special needs taking our online classes, we work closely with that student's case manager to come up with unique and/or creative strategies to provide that necessary support.

— Dana Breed, Stevens Point Area Online Learning Center

Using Different Modalities to Reach Students

How Great Teachers Teach Struggling Learners

Great teachers share some commonalities in how they approach teaching. They continually refine their teaching craft, devote energy and effort to their approach, and reflect on how to make a lesson better and more accessible the next time. Great teachers also present content in a variety of ways to enhance student learning and make the lesson come alive using authentic and meaningful techniques. They may use videos, personal stories and storyboards, songs, or even art to enhance the content and appeal to a variety of student learning preferences. When teaching struggling learners, you may want to begin with step number one below and take the individual learner through a specific learning process for success. Keep in mind that the intended outcome is small steps of success, not giant leaps of learning.

1. Activate prior knowledge
2. Make learning connections
3. Manage the instructional learner level
4. Model the desired responses
5. Provide opportunities for lots of guided practice

For more ideas about how to present material in different modalities, visit: http://vark-learn.com/strategies/

Universal Design for Learning

When differentiating instruction online, one of the frameworks to use is that of the Universal Design for Learning. It helps the instructor meet students where they are. Here are the key concepts for applying UDL in your learning environment:

1. *Principle I: Provide Multiple Means of Representation (the "what" of learning)*
2. *Principle II: Provide Multiple Means of Action and Expression (the "how" of learning)*
3. *Principle III: Provide Multiple Means of Engagement (the "why" of learning)*

For more information about UDL, please visit: http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/whatisudl/3principles

UDL Scan Tool: http://centerononlinelearning.org/resources/udl-scan-tool/

I often help my students beyond the content by creating videos with Jing. This allows students to hear my voice AND see the concept taught in a different format, and I can go at a pace that is appropriate for that individual.

Many struggling learners lack the prerequisite knowledge required to be successful in the course in which they are enrolled. Particularly by high school, many struggling students have been passed on without attaining even a proficient level of understanding of key concepts and learning building blocks required for success. They typically don't know how to learn. That's where your expertise as a professional educator comes into play.

Put together by the School of Education at William and Mary, here is a comprehensive collection of different instructional strategies delineated by discipline and/or learning disability to help you help your students learn. Visit https://education.wm.edu/centers/ttac/resources/articles/teachtechnique/

I have found that the use of polling during live lessons along with video or screencasts work well to address individual questions and also help those students who struggle with any type of written or reading communication.

— Ray Sperl, iForward

👍

Practical instructional strategies used by online instructors to help struggling students: write clear directions, provide examples, create an assignment checklist with the pacing guide, use rubrics to clarify, make the learning relevant to the individual student, provide alternative options to meet the desired goal, provide instruction using multiple modalities, e.g., voice, video, written email, screen captures, synchronous real-time sessions.

👍

Use the learners preferred communication method such as: texting, email, phone. They are more prone to be in touch and communicate using the communication method that's more helpful to them.

Teaching Culturally Diverse Students

An online teaching experience may require a fuller understanding of the variety of culturally diverse students you may provide instruction to online as well as the educational settings and expectations of the learning experience and environment of their native culture. You may encounter students who are new to the U.S. Not only are they adapting to a new language, but a new way of life and societal norms as well. Build a relationship with these students, respect them, provide opportunities for them to practice their new behaviors, and use guided feedback as they become acclimated to online learning.

Annie Shibata, Ph.D., a cross-cultural trainer, researcher, and lecturer, suggests these strategies for helping students succeed in the online learning environment:

1. Keep the language standard and as much as possible, culture neutral. Avoid using slang, idiomatic expressions and culture specific humor and references.
2. Make expectations about online learning clear. Some students may come from societies or cultures where students are not expected to be responsible for their own learning.
3. Be accessible. Some students are used to hierarchical systems where the instructor is the "expert," thus these students are likely to feel more lost in the online (classroom) and need more instructor contact.
4. Learn about other cultures, but remember that the linkage between culture and learning styles are affected by age, gender, and individual experiences and preferences.
5. Avoid making generalizations about individuals based on superficial knowledge about the group. Understand your own teaching and learning style preferences, and your assumptions about learning. Cultural self-awareness by instructors is crucial. Uncover your own hidden biases.
6. Understand your target audience. If the target audience is in America, then a reasonable expectation is that students will make accommodations to the American learning process.

Students in the online environment will be learning new skills as they are learning course content. Be prepared for challenges related to self-regulation, time management, accountability, and communication. The move from face-to-face to online learning requires a lot of adjustment for students. Look to your students' mentors for support. Share your perspective with them and offer to collaborate on solutions because they're working with students on the same set of new skills.

Consider having all students write an introduction to you. As we have seen, learning preferences and culture have a number of variables involved.

Example:

a.   *My experience with online learning is_____.*

b.   *Having to put my ideas in writing and share them with other students on the discussion board makes me feel _____ because _____.*

c.   *I'm taking this class online because _____.*

d.   *In this course, I'm most worried about _____.*

e.   *In order to be successful in this class, I need the instructor to _____ .*

f.   *I do/do not prefer to work in groups.*

From Annie Shibata, Ph.D.

Netiquette Guidelines

Online students may feel anonymous given the fact that they cannot see you and you cannot see them. Their appropriate behavior online will need to be guided in this new environment to maximize the learning potential of all students and provide everyone a safe environment. This is particularly evident when it comes to communicating with their teachers and other students via email, text, and discussion boards.

Helping your online students realize that the expectation of appropriate behavior in the online classroom is no different than in a brick-and-mortar schoolroom needs to be presented deliberately. There are certain behaviors that are expected of everyone within the confines of that classroom including the interaction with instructors and their peers. Because this is a new experience for online learners, they need guidance and support to develop their own Four Ps of communication and feedback to learn how to be personal, polite, positive, and professional. You can find many samples of netiquette guidelines on the internet. Select one and share it with your students by placing it in the resource area of your LMS, or check with the students' mentors and reinforce what they're doing.

Some teachers ask that their students sign and return guidelines to pledge themselves to following them. Some teachers go as far as getting parents/guardians to sign as well to say that they will check in with their students to ensure they're following the guidelines and being respectful of others.

COPYRIGHT AND FAIR USE

Have you ever copied part of an article, musical selection, picture, or movie not created by yourself to show to your students? Most educators would not give these instances of using someone else's work a second thought because it's for an educational purpose. However, teachers need to consider the legal ramifications that may be attached to the use of some of these materials as the U.S. federal government takes copyright infringement very seriously. A key question to ask involving the use of anyone else's work is whether your intended use is for commercial use or for a nonprofit educational purpose.

Copyright and Fair Use Guidelines for Teachers

To ensure you are following proper copyright protocol, consider the following suggestions before using and/or copying materials within your online courses:

- Link to a copyrighted source that's available online unless that violates terms of use.
- Embed YouTube videos because embedding is a form of linking and the YouTube license is sufficient for use.
- Use copyrighted material without permission if it is covered under Fair Use.

Fair Use is permitted under certain conditions when your use contributes to society. See the resource box on this page to learn the four factors of Fair Use.

This job aid provides a quick reference specifically for teachers regarding copyright and Fair Use. http://education.ky.gov/districts/tech/ciits/Documents/TeacherCopyright_chart.pdf

When in doubt of a copyright infringement, ask the owner of the work for permission. Use Public Domain resources whenever possible. Also, provide the appropriate attribution to the work such as pictures you may use online. Creative Commons provides easy to use licenses to reuse materials at: https://creative commons.org/. Check out royalty-free images to use in online courses:

- *https://pixabay.com*
- *https://www.pexels.com*
- *https://www.flickr.com—filter search results by Creative Commons license*
- *https://commons.wikimedia.org—all images are either Creative Commons or Public Domain.*

How to Cite Sources

What are the benefits of properly citing one's sources of information?

- Gives credit where credit is due.
- Provides a trail so that other people can locate the sources you used.
- Provides evidence of your research.
- Helps you avoid plagiarizing and is a good model for students.

Many quick reference guides for properly citing your sources are available online. Provide several to your students or create your own based on your favorite resources and post it in your course resources area in your course LMS.

What Is Not Copyright Protected?

- Facts
- Ideas
- A joke that is not written down
- A song that is sung but is not written down
- Short names or slogans
- Titles, names, short phrases, and slogans; familiar symbols or designs; mere variations of typographic ornamentation, lettering, or coloring; mere listings of ingredients or contents.
- Items that are common property with no original author such as calendars, rulers, etc.
- Works in the public domain or the federal government

What Is Copyright Protected?

- Websites, presentations, published music, reports, etc. — any original work created in tangible form
- Anonymous works until 95 years after publication
- The HTML code used to create web pages
- Graphics, pictures, or charts from other websites
- Commercial software

PLAGIARISM

Typically, students do not get a lot of instruction about plagiarism and the consequences. Many people suspect the online environment is rife with cheating and plagiarism. Post your expectations for original and cited work in your course and provide guidelines or online sources students can use as a reference. Contact mentors if you need support with particular students or assignments.

Detecting Plagiarism Online

- Conduct a web search by copying and pasting several lines of the document into the search engine to find a match on the internet. Follow your teacher radar if an assignment doesn't feel right and raises a red flag with you.

- Check the time and date stamp of when the assignment was submitted. Most LMSs provide time and date stamps for all assignments submitted within the course. If a student submits several assignments within a very short time frame, this may be an indication of inappropriate assignment sharing with another individual.

- Ask if the student is using a flash drive to save his/her work and then submits all work at the same time.

- Ask the student if the author of the document is a relative who registered the software (like Word, PowerPoint, etc.) on the computer the student uses for online classes.

- Ask if the student used a public computer such as at the school's computer lab and forgot to logout which may have allowed someone else to access the course without the student's knowledge. The mentors should be able to help you verify if the student was working on a computer in an online learning lab.

> *When I see an assignment that does not appear to be the student's original work, I assume that the error is on my end and clarify by asking a few questions. In my follow-up feedback, I ask the student specific questions that would expand on their work to check for true understanding of the material. I may also ask for specific references and/or resources that the student used to help in completing the assignment. This almost always clarifies whether plagiarism is a factor in the completed assignment.*
>
> **— Jon Oestreich, WI Virtual**

Preventing Poor Choices Like Cheating and Plagiarism

- Be sure students understand what constitutes plagiarism and how to cite sources.

- Provide students and mentors your expectations for the assessment setting (e.g., no phones, browsers closed).

- Develop good relationships with students.

- Emphasize learning and mastery over accountability and completion.

Proctored assessments can be set up to help verify who is taking an exam. For example, the instructor password-protects a test and provides the password to the mentor at the local school who then goes to that student's computer, types in the password, and the test then opens up for the student. This solution takes coordination on the part of the student, mentor, and instructor.

If possible, where the course design provides a test bank of questions which can be randomly selected for each test taker or the order of the questions can be rearranged, take advantage of those options to help maintain the integrity of the assessment.

If you suspect that someone else may be taking an assessment for your online student, then set up a mutually agreeable time in which you can conduct a verbal assessment with the student to validate your concerns.

STANDARDS FOR ONLINE EDUCATION

While the quality of the course you're teaching may be out of your hands, know that other agencies and organizations provide oversight and/or guidelines that contribute to a quality online teaching and learning experience.

AdvancEd — http://www.advanc-ed.org/ — Program accreditation

AdvancEd is nationally and internationally recognized as the accreditation body for many public and charter schools. This organization periodically conducts on-site external reviews of schools to ensure learners can achieve their full potential.

iNACOL — http://www.inacol.org/ — Program, course quality, and teacher standards

The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) "drives the transformation toward student-centered, next generation learning for K-12 education."

Quality Matters — https://www.qualitymatters.org/grades-6-12 — Course quality standards

Quality Matters (QM) is an international organization whose mission is to "promote and improve the quality of online education and student learning through [for example] development of research-supported, best practice-based quality standards and appropriate evaluation tools and procedures" and "provision of faculty development training in the use of QM Rubric(s) and other quality practices to improve the quality of online/blended courses." See https://www.qualitymatters.org/ to learn more about how QM has developed a quality assurance program for K-12 online learning.

Curriculum Quality

Quality at the curricular level is informed primarily by state adopted standards, including the Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC), the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and nationally recognized standards, such as those established by the College Board for Advanced Placement (AP) courses. It is important that courses are aligned to state or national standards to ensure that students earn appropriate credit towards meeting their academic goals (e.g., graduation or certificate).

RESOURCES

iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Teaching
https://www.inacol.org/resource/inacol-national-standards-for-quality-online-teaching-v2/

iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Courses
https://www.inacol.org/resource/inacol-national-standards-for-quality-online-courses-v2/

iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Programs
https://www.inacol.org/resource/inacol-national-standards-for-quality-online-programs/

Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities in K-12 Online Learning: An Analysis of the iNACOL Program, Course, and Teacher Standards
https://mvlri.org/research/publications/meeting-needs-students-disabilities-k-12-online-learning/

Access for All: Serving Students with Disabilities in Online and Blended Learning Environments
http://media.mivu.org/institute/pdf/servingstudents.pdf

Parent Guide to Online Learning
https://mvlri.org/resources/guides/parent-guide/

Mentor Fundamentals: A Guide to Mentoring Online Learners
https://mvlri.org/resources/guides/mentor-guide/

Student Guide to Online Learning
https://mvlri.org/resources/guides/student-guide/

Supporting Online Learners: Michigan Mentor Program Case Studies
https://mvlri.org/research/publications/michigan-mentor-program-cs/

The Changing Roles of Educators Series: The Blended Learning Coach
https://mvlri.org/research/publications/changing-role-educators-series-blended-learning-coach/

The Changing Roles of Educators Series: The Blended Teacher
https://mvlri.org/research/publications/the-changing-roles-of-educators-series-the-blended-teacher-2/

The Changing Roles of Educators Series: The Instructional Technologist
https://mvlri.org/research/publications/changing-roles-educators-series-instructional-technologist/

ON THE SAME PAGE

CAITLYN SKINNER, MONTANA DIGITAL ACADEMY

The purpose of answering these questions:

I will better understand you, you will better understand the course and you will have the opportunity to better understand me (ask questions!)

QUESTIONS	YOUR ANSWERS
1. What name do you prefer to go by?	
2. Where are you from, and what do you like to do most where you live?	
3. Why are you taking an online course in English this summer?	
4. How many online courses have you taken before?	
5. Our email accounts are EXTREMELY important in keeping the lines of communication open. Did you send me an email from your [school/course/LMS] account, to my [school/course/LMS] account?	
6. What will help you succeed in this course?	
7. What may prevent you (physical, educational, family-related issues, etc.) from succeeding in this course?	
8. What specific problems are you having, if any, getting started on the coursework?	

QUESTIONS	YOUR ANSWERS
9. Do you have any vacation, camp, or similar plans that may require some extra planning to stay on pace in the class? Please list any/all that you know about.	
10. What specific goals do you have for this course?	
11. What type of communication do you prefer — email, chat, phone, text? If it's a number that may not be in the [course/LMS], please list it in your answer.	
12. What are my office hours? [add hint for finding your office hours here]	
13. What is the name of the mentor or mentors assigned to you at your school?	
14. Whom would it be best to contact regarding your grades and progress? (Please provide email or phone number.)	
15. Are you aware that a summer course has the same amount of work that a course has during the school year?	
16. Is there anything else you would like me to know?	
17. Is there anything else you would like to know about me or the course?	

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- Appleton Area School District
- Baraboo School District
- Grantsburg School District
- Green Bay Area Public School District
- School District of Janesville
- Kenosha Unified School District
- Kiel Area School District
- Kimberly Area School District
- Madison Metropolitan School District
- Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District
- Oshkosh Area School District
- Racine Unified School District
- Sheboygan Area School District
- Wisconsin Virtual School (CESA 9)

Affiliate Partners

- Cameron School District
- Chetek School District
- DeForest Area School District
- Franklin Public School District
- Kewaskum School District
- School District of LaCrosse
- Medford School District (Rural Virtual Academy)
- School District of Nekoosa
- River Valley School District
- School District of Superior
- Stevens Point Area School District
- Triton Network
- Watertown Unified School District
- Waunakee Community School District

TEACHER GUIDE TO ONLINE LEARNING

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