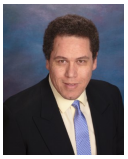

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Digital Learning

Growing Successful Virtual Learners Requires New Teaching Styles

Some schools have adapted to distance learning whilst others have struggled. The secret is not to try and replicate traditional classroom teaching online. John McCarthy, author and former curriculum director of an online school in America , outlines a better way

A Tale of Three Schools

"My teachers are exhausted from teaching virtually," an administrator told me on a call. He explained that his staff were teaching all student sections live online,

based on the schedule followed when everyone met in the building.

Some students had un-muted mics while others looked like they are multitasking watching videos unrelated to the course topic. Teachers did not know how many of their students were paying attention. With six to seven periods, teachers and students were attending live online classes using mostly traditional teaching methods of lecture and teacher-led questions and answers.

“No wonder the teachers were exhausted, they are working harder than the students,” I thought. And the students must also feel exhausted from sitting in front of a computer screen all day for traditional instruction.

At a second school, a teacher team expressed frustration that students did not complete all assignments. Or, they did not turn in work on time. The tasks were worksheets and questions that focused on abstract concepts, without making any connection to applications in businesses or the workforce.

They discovered that they needed to make two changes. First, build purpose and meaning to the assignments by showing connections to real world applications. Second, they needed to teach their students ways to better manage their classwork schedule.

At another school, the administrator shared a different perspective. Her teachers met with their students in smaller groups, two to three times a week. Assignments were posted on their classroom platform. Tasks were a mix of traditional work and activities that were aligned to students’ interests or gave them choices for how to complete assignments.

Teachers maintained virtual office hours for students to contact them for quick turnaround feedback. Teachers and students seemed to find a rhythm for teaching and learning experiences. Many of the schools who I encountered seeing successful virtual implementation shared similar approaches and practices as this final example.

Launching a Successful Virtual Journey

Virtual instruction has some advantages that do not exist broadly in the brick and mortar setting. There is a wealth of digital tools that can raise engagement and give immediate support to what needs to be understood. Students have the freedom to choose where and when they want to do work, taking breaks without needing permission from others.

Sitting at a desk for at least a quarter of the day can be exhausting and difficult to maintain focus. Adding the practice of waiting to be told what to do before doing anything, makes any school day seem longer than needed. Whereas in a virtual environment, students move around and sit or stand as they please. The tasks require that the students must take more of a lead in their learning, because no one is there to walk them through each step.

An effective virtual learning environment is made up of two components: Real-Time Learning Experiences and Offline Leaning experiences. Each play an important role in engaging students in high quality learning. Both are necessary to meet the needs of all learners, who approach virtual learning with different levels of comfort and success.

Real-Time (Live) Learning Experiences and Support

One value of brick and mortar classrooms is that teachers and students interact in real-time. Interactions and responses are instantaneous. Feedback is immediate and timely. Rapport is built through these face-to-face meetings where expressions and tone play an integral part to the relationships built by teachers and students.

This need is also important and possible during virtual sessions that are live. Real-time virtual learning experiences can replicate much of what needs to be communicated and supported. One exception may be classroom management of large groups of students, as expressions like the “teacher stare” is not so readily effective through a camera.

However, these challenges can be addressed through the strengths that virtual sessions can provide. In many ways, what is presented below could be adapted to the brick and mortar experience. Such practices are what blended teaching and learning can successfully combine the strengths of both. Here are key considerations for supporting a strong and supportive real-time virtual learning environment.

1. Real-time instruction should focus on active learner involvement

Meeting with students for real-time should be more about learning experiences than overt teacher instruction. Whoever is the most active during a lesson is likely to be the most engaged in the lesson. Whoever is talking about a topic is likely getting the most understanding. Therefore, it is important to structure lessons so that students are in the lead two-thirds of the live sessions.

Give students tasks where they explain their process for completing a problem or composing a message. Have them ideate on how to solve a real-world problem or puzzle in collaborative learning groups.

Lectures that are longer than ten minutes without a break may be more useful as recordings on YouTube. Prior to the real-time session, students watch the lecture and post reflections based on teacher prompts. The teacher uses their responses as part of instruction that engages students in interactive experiences such as review discussions, applying skills, and unpacking their understanding.

Where lectures are necessary, chunk them every five minutes with opportunities for students to reflect on the key ideas and ask questions. These thinking activity breaks best ensures that students are processing the learning and not multitasking on to games and other activities unrelated to your course.

There are many tools available to engage students into real-time activities, such as flipgrid, discussion boards, breakout rooms, and collaborative files through Google Docs or Microsoft Teams. Use these tools to engage students in presenting and analyzing what they know and do not know. This allows the teacher to use her expertise to address learning gaps and develop students' inquiry skills.

2. Hold office hours for personalized support

Meeting with students individually and in small groups is one of the best benefits of virtual learning. Maintaining a flexible approach to schedule empowers teachers to plan meetings that best serves their learners. Making decisions based on differentiation of student skill level, interests, and learning preferences improves the quality of office hours sessions.

During office hours, teachers can build more understanding of content with a focus on small learner groups, whereas a session with the entire class may focus

on content coverage as checking for understanding becomes more challenging.

It is important to check-in with every student at least once a week, more often depending on need. Such contact can become difficult to support when the number of students on a roster grows.

Weekly contacts can be a mix of live conversations, emails, and text message apps. Depending on the class size, live conversations with each student outside of whole class time might happen every two weeks, however emails and/or text message apps, like WhatsApp, should and can occur at least once a week–more often depending on the student's needs.

Some schools assign teachers as mentors to a small group of students, who they connect with through email or text messaging app. In these cases, teachers are only having to manage a smaller caseload of students, acting as their mentor. They help direct support for the student with the content teachers whose class they are struggling in. Identify and establish a system that includes all three types of communication so that students get the best support in way that is manageable by teachers.

Real-time instruction and office hours are ways to customize or personalize learning, respectively, to meet learner needs. Partner these with offline activities provide formative learning experiences that teachers can use to reinforce concepts and assess progress of learner growth.

3. Relationships Development Matters

Getting to know students on a personal level is even more important in virtual classrooms. This happens much through small group and individual sessions. Emails and instant message apps are also ways for connecting the puzzle pieces that make up a person. Through empathy, understanding, and patience through ongoing interactions, teachers can encourage, support, and challenge students to strive for their best efforts.

Personalized feedback can gain greater traction with students because text becomes more of a communication tool in online courses. Use the real-time conversations to plant idea seeds and build strong roots, so that offline conversations can be used to nurture learner growth.

Offline (Asynchronous) Learning Experiences and Support

An important part of learning is how students actively study, apply, and evaluate using the content skills and concepts. We learn best through trial and lots of errors. Instruction must be concretely structured and supported. The potential problem with traditional assignments is that there is rarely a built-in feedback loop or supports for when the errors happen.

Normally, the students would complete the work and bring it into class the next day for a live session where the teacher runs through the solutions, while addressing common errors. Such an approach can leave learners frustrated while doing the homework because they are stuck without support for completing tasks until the next class meeting. What follows are approaches to engage students more intensely into the learning.

a) Interactive Assignments

A good virtual or digital assignment is interactive. It includes embedded links to videos, references, and other tools that the learner can use in the moment. For example, a math task would include videos from the teacher or a math platform like Khan Academy. These give just-in-time feedback on the conceptual understandings needed to complete the tasks.

References on bibliography citations, literary criticism, or historical data can be embedded into assignments that students can use to check or clarify their understanding of the task. The resources are one click away, which is opposite to traditional assignments.

All these tools can be linked into assignments with intention, so that a reflection section includes a link to Seesaw, Flipgrid or other discussion board tool. This enables students to share their thinking in a variety of mediums. The possibilities for offline assignments are endless.

b). Empowering Student Voice for Demonstrating their Learning

Students have access to many digital resources that support their understanding of content and concepts, as described with interactive assignments, and other digital tools that learners can use to demonstrate their understanding and use of skills. Give them choices for how best to express themselves through access to a wealth of digital toolsi for students to build knowledge, apply skills in practical ways, and produce products that demonstrate growth towards mastery.

For example, a simple recording or video app can empower learners to express themselves fully without the possible challenge of poor writing skills. Essentially, the written word does not become an obstacle to what they want to say. Tools like Screencastify, Adobe Sparks, and Powtoons enable students to record their screen or create dynamic presentations for expressing their understanding of skills and content. The products are exported into formats that are easily sent to the teacher or published on various social media platforms.

c). Mastering one's schedule – working anytime and anywhere

Working virtually gives learners the power to decide when and where to study and complete tasks. Several studies of secondary and post-secondary students found learning was best between later in the morning to evening, depending on the students (Frontiers in Human Neuroscience[2], ASCD[3] and Statistics[4]). As a curriculum director for an online school, I received data that showed consistent and active study by many students between the hours of 9pm and 3am.

This is not to say that there were other students who did their work in the late morning to afternoon. It shows that learners have optimal times in the day that

they prefer to work that varies beyond one fixed schedule imposed on everyone. Sleep is important, which can be shifted in the day to meet the person's needs.

Having interactive assignments that are completed offline or asynchronously enables students to flexibly plan their day to do the work when it best fits their schedule. It allows them to schedule school requirements along with working a job, competing on an athletic team, participating in various organizations, and fulfilling family obligations.

Also, students can travel or shift their setting to whatever feels comfortable. Some prefer to work indoors, outdoors, with music, or in silence. Ultimately, the choice is with the learner.

d) Developing Self-Agency Skills

Providing an environment where students can set their schedule and complete work in ways of their own choosing is a wonderful outcome. Expecting such a result without guidance can be a disaster in the waiting. Some students know how to manage their schedule and ask for help when they needed. Others need help with developing or strengthening their skill sets for monitoring and advocating for resources and assistance. Here are three steps to assist building their skills:

(i) Provide a "Suggested" Schedule

It is amazing what a table schedule can do as guidance for students. In the sample below, students receive a schedule for completing tasks offline. Some parts are completed by the teacher, while other parts are completed by the student.

Start Date & Time	Time Amount	Task Description	Due Date	Check-off when Completed
	20 min.	Review directions and gather materials.		
	10 min.	Complete steps 1	October 1	
	20 min.	Complete steps 2	October 1	
	15 min.	Complete steps 3	October 1	
	Optional	Check-in during step 1 or 2 if confused or need more direction.		
	15 min.	Conference with Teacher about progress Options: 1) video conference, 2) Flipgrid, 3) Screencastify recording	October 5	
	25 min.	Revise steps 1-3 from feedback		
	50 min.	Complete step 4	October 7	

Columns 2, 3 and 4 are filled in by the teacher.

These entries communicate a picture for how the work can be done and shows the structure within which the students make decisions about completing the work. Due dates are listed only for when the teacher needs to collect artifacts or check-in with students. The other steps do not include due dates because the student sets their own timeline for how the work gets done.

Columns 1 and 5 are completed by the students.

Students determine the start date and time for each task. Encourage them to complete column one as they review the directions. Establishing a schedule gives experience with formal planning for a project. The schedule might change during execution, which is a life-lesson that students use to edit the schedule as needed. As each task is completed, students note this in the final column.

If and when students propose a different way of managing their work, let them try “their way”, so long as documentation is included. Those who succeed will have an approach to share with peers. Those who struggle or fail will have an approach to reflect about with feedback from the teacher and their peers to improve their system. Either situation is a win-win for building student agency.

ii) Chunk Assignments using a Checklist

Students can feel overwhelmed by assignments with many steps or that require a large amount of time to complete. Some examples include a 5-page research paper or a task with many steps. When students are working offline, frustration can creep into their mindset. Chunking an assignment into manageable portions can help learners understand where to begin.

Sometimes getting started eliminates mental obstacles. Other times, seeing the component parts of the whole helps to build a sense of progress and achievement along the way. For example, understanding that the research paper assignment is made up of 7 components:

1. annotated biography of 3 references
2. outline of key points and counter argument
3. first draft includes only the body of ideas (no introduction or conclusion)
4. peer feedback session
5. revised second draft with introduction and conclusion
6. peer feedback session
7. final draft revision

Combine this approach with the schedule table shared previously for students to seamlessly understand the parts and plan their own schedule. If this research paper example was in a schedule table, some of the components may be further broken out to help students with planning their time, such as component three.

Each required main idea would need to be planned by students for scheduling when they would write them. If each idea took 30 minutes to complete, and four ideas were required, students would need to either combine the time into one 2-hour block or spread out into four 30-minute blocks across multiple days. The student's decision would be based on their approach to writing.

iii) Schedule Check-Ins for Monitoring Progress

"What gets monitored gets done," is an adage that I've followed most of my career, and witnessed its success for others who manage systems, staff, students and projects. Giving a multi-step or complex assignment to students can be most successful when the teacher actively check-ins with them. Meeting with students in real-time and receiving communications about progress on a regular basis is critical. Teachers can best support their learners based on the information they have about work status and comprehension levels. The worst situation is to not check-in until near the final due date and discover that students are stuck on the first few steps.

Note that in the student scheduler, the teacher included a required check-in before starting step 4. This is to ensure academic progress is sufficient or if coaching is needed. Also included is an optional check-in that is controlled by the students in case they decide support is needed sooner. The required check-ins are important to have, especially early on in developing student agency. Those learners who show skill in self-monitoring effectively may need fewer required check-ins then others.

Next Steps: Begin with the End in Mind

Many teachers are gaining experience with virtual learning than ever before. The results can be very successful as shown by a study of some of the best online teachers.[6] A benefit of implementation is that, like our students, we learn and improve our skills with reflection. A good virtual class places student engagement at the forefront. If they are active and leading the work, they can be held accountable for what is accomplished. Reflect on how the checklists below can help your colleagues make their students' virtual learning experiences even better:

Realtime Learning Checklist

Do student voices and actions make up of at least 60% of the real-time lesson?

What activities can be revised to raise student voice and action over teacher airtime?

Identify which lectures can be recorded and become an offline assignment?

Identify points in a lecture (every 5-8 minutes) to insert a reflection activity for students to process that chunk of content.

For office hours, evaluate and groups learners based common skill support.

For office hours, setup a support structure that includes a mix of live conversations, emails, and text message apps. The goal is to make contact at last once a week, with live conversations happening once a week or once every two weeks depending on student roster size.

Offline Learning Checklist

Make all assignments interactive. Embed links to resources to support content and/or for collaborative learning conversations (flipgrid, padlet, or discussion boards)

Provide 2 or more ways for students to demonstrate their learning, such as recording their screen, audio threads, and/or visual presentations through powtoons or Adobe Spark

Provide a suggested schedule with fixed content and space for students to plan their schedule for completing each part.

Include check-in times between teacher and student.

Create checklists based on chunking large tasks into smaller steps, which helps show progress.

About The Author

John McCarthy is an educator, author and consultant. He. Supports schools across the globe, he shares a perspective for effective practices that work for teachers and students everywhere. Author of So All Can Learn: A practical guide to differentiation, he also writes many articles on topics concerning the needs of educators and student success with learning.

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