Seven strategies for supporting student learning in a remote environment

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The Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically upended traditional schooling and made remote learning the "new normal." Teachers are scrambling to offer some form of continuing education using virtual technologies, with the recognition that traditional approaches to curriculum, instruction, assessment, and grading must be altered. While it might be more expedient to present online lessons, electronic worksheets, and resource packets, we propose that the learn-at-home circumstance offers an opportunity to present students with more engaging and meaningful learning experiences. More specifically, we recommend providing students with assignments and tasks that challenge them to find information from various sources, critically appraise what they find, and use what they learn to address interesting issues and genuine problems.

The national scouting organizations offer a useful model for this vision of home learning. For example, the Boy Scouts

offer 137 Boy Scout Merit Badge options and 58 of these are eligible for home completion. All the scouting merit badges are based on the challenges we experience in the world around us. They specify the criteria that must be met to earn a badge, yet they allow the scouts options and choices as they work on fulfilling the task requirements. Moreover, they are able to [work toward the badge until they are ready to submit their evidence of completion](#), as opposed to being constrained by an arbitrary time frame.

In this blog, we offer seven strategies for planning and conducting remote learning. These strategies apply to all learning environments, but they are especially relevant in the context of remote learning. They support meaningful engagement, are flexible and responsive to different learners' needs, and promote the development of students' agency. While the description of each strategy is brief, we provide weblinks to additional information and related resources.

1. **Focus tasks on worthy goals and meaningful learning.**

There is certainly value for students working at home to practice their basic skills — especially younger learners. However, in general, we recommend that remote learning be framed around rich, engaging tasks that target more robust learning goals. We encourage teachers to plan learning experiences that focus on applying "anchor standards" of

E/LA, the Practices in Mathematics and Science, Historical Thinking Skills in Social Studies, and the creative processes in the arts. We also endorse the use of assignments and tasks that concurrently engage the application of "21st Century Skills" including critical thinking, creativity, research, and communication using various media.

Associated assignments and tasks would, therefore, be performance-based, and set in realistic contexts as much as possible. Such performance tasks involve students in "doing" subjects and performing with their knowledge, rather than learning factual knowledge only. These tasks are open-ended, challenging and require "higher-order" thinking, not rote learning. Since they reflect authentic situations, they address purposes that students can relate to and that they recognize as important and useful in their present lives or in the future. Such tasks often include opportunities for students to generate and explore their own questions, make connections across disciplines, and consider the needs and characteristics of the audience for whom they are doing the work. Tasks that involve research, problem-solving, and decision-making can also promote habits of mind like open-mindedness, skepticism, and flexible thinking. When students are engaged in work that is meaningful and authentic, they are unlikely to ask: "Why are we doing this?" or "Who would ever use this?" as they might when only learning de-contextualized facts and skills.

While we recognize that not all tasks can be authentic, we have seen that many assignments/tasks can be rendered more meaningful and authentic when they include a realistic goal, a tangible product or performance, created for a target audience, within genuine constraints (e.g., schedule and/or budget). There are many resources of well-developed performance tasks that teachers can access to be able to act on this recommendation.

Online resources:

- A searchable database of performance tasks, projects, and rubrics
  - [Stanford SCALE Performance Task Database](#)
  - [PBL Works Project Planner](#)

- [Ideas to make assignments and tasks more authentic](#)
- [Ideas for planning meaningful learning experiences at home](#)

2. **Specify the task directions and success criteria.**

When presenting open-ended tasks, students need clear directions for the work they are being asked to do. This is particularly important for remote learning since teachers are less able to monitor students' non-verbal and verbal interactions and anticipate the kinds of questions students may have about an assignment. Consider questions like

these when developing directions for assignments and tasks: What exactly do you want students to do? What is the purpose and audience for their work? What products and/or performances should they create? What should the work include? What elements are required? … optional? How will their work be judged? What qualities are expected? How good is "good" enough?

In addition to clear directions, teachers should provide students with the success criteria in the form of checklists, rating sheets, and/or rubrics that describe expectations in a way that all students, regardless of their background or language level, can clearly understand.

Here is an example of a short performance task for secondary students with clear directions and associated success criteria:

Issue: Should drones be regulated?

Task: After researching possible commercial uses of drones and examining various opinions on the issue, develop your own position and develop a written product (policy brief, editorial or blog post) that argues for your position to an identified policy group (e.g., city council). Support your position with evidence from your research and your reasoning. Be sure to acknowledge and rebut opposing views.

Success Criteria: Your argument should

- cite sound and relevant research
- present accurate and sufficient evidence to support your position
- contain logical reasoning
- effectively identify and counter objections to your position
- address your target audience
- The written product should be mechanically correct.

Note: Whenever possible, we recommend including "anchors" — tangible examples of work to illustrate the various performance levels on a scale to help students better understand the desired qualities.

Online resources:

- Ideas for developing or refining checklists and rubrics
  - [Criteria for Quality Checklists](#)
  - [Checklist for Quality Rubrics](#)

3. **Provide differentiated support and encourage students' "choice and voice."**

Students vary greatly when it comes to their background knowledge, prior experiences, interests, and preferences for learning. Accordingly, they will need different degrees, and types, of support as they work on authentic tasks. Knowing

the needs of their students, teachers can offer targeted mini-lessons and coaching sessions as needed. They can also provide appropriate "scaffolds" to support individuals and groups; e.g., step-by-step directions, graphic organizers, outlines, simplified texts, models, and on-line tutorials.

In addition to such differentiated instruction and supports, we strongly encourage allowing students alternatives for the work they will pursue. Indeed, there are a variety of ways of allowing "voice and choice" for learners as part of open-ended performance tasks, including the topic of their work, the ways they approach a task, the means of gathering information, and options for the products or performances they will produce.

We have found that giving learners appropriate choices increases their personal motivation. It also helps create their sense of agency and cultivate the skills and habits of self-directed learning.

Online resources:

- Ideas for differentiation
  - *Students at the Center: Personalized Learning with Habits of Mind*
- Ideas for offering "voice and choice"

4. **Provide feedback along the way.**

Providing feedback to learners as they work has been conclusively shown to be one of the most effective of all educational practices. To have the optimal effect, feedback must be on-going, timely, specific, and descriptive, focused on the most salient attributes of the work, and understandable by the learner. Teachers can provide such feedback while students are working using questions, comments or suggestions that assist learners in refining their thinking and performance. In remote learning situations, parents, siblings and other students can also provide feedback by reviewing working drafts of products and performances. However, for such remote reviews to be successful, teachers need to model giving and receiving feedback, since students and parents may have never experienced this structured process. Of course, parents and siblings need to be reminded that their role is to provide feedback that will help the learner improve their work, not to do the work for them.

Online resources:

A checklist that can help teachers craft helpful feedback to

students and a rubric that can help students provide feedback to each other:

- [Checklist for Quality Feedback](#)
- [Supporting Student Peer Feedback](#)

5. **Encourage students' self-assessment, reflection, and goal setting.**

John Dewey noted that "We don't learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on our experience." Students' work on meaningful and engaging tasks offers a natural opportunity for them to self-assess their performance, reflect on their learning and set future learning goals. McTighe and Wiggins (2004) offer the following set of prompts that can be used to stimulate students' self-assessments, reflections and goal setting:

- What do you really understand about?
- What questions/uncertainties do you still have about?
- What was most effective in?
- How could you improve?
- What would you do differently next time?
- What are your strengths?
- How does what you've learned connect to other learnings?
- How has what you've learned changed your thinking?
- How does what you've learned relate to the present

and future?

By regularly posing such questions and expecting learners to respond, teachers can cultivate lifelong skills and the productive habits of self-directed learners.

6. **Resist traditional grading.**

Home learning offers the opportunity to take a break from the traditional A–F grading scale. When students are engaged in authentic assignments and performance tasks, try shifting to an alternative scale; e.g., CD = completed with distinction; C = completed; NC = not yet completed. More generally, we recommend the use of "grading" that emphasizes the degree of completion of, and progress toward, goals/standards based on quality criteria. When teachers are freed from applying norm-referenced criteria and instead use statements that reference students' progress or development like "not yet"; "met desired criteria"; "can teach others, or have met the criteria with distinction", they communicate that learning is an ongoing process and that it takes time and sometimes multiple tries for work to meet quality standards.

Online resources:

- For advice on grading for remote learning
    - [Assessments and grading in the midst of a](#)

7. Request an "honor code" pledge from students and parents.

The lines between learning at home and learning in school have disappeared, and parents are now charged with monitoring as well as supporting their children's learning. Having an honor code reinforces the importance of trust and upholds the belief that students are responsible for their own learning and for the attitudes and dispositions with which they approach their schoolwork. Asking parents to take an honor code pledge reinforces the expectation that parents should be supportive of their children's learning, but that completed work should reflect the students' own thinking and performance.

Online resources:

- Sample honor codes
  - [Academic integrity in online learning](#)
  - [Virtual Merit Badge Guidelines](#)

Conclusion

While the shift to remote learning was unexpected and has required significant adaptations from parents, teachers, and

students, it has also opened the door to revisiting what is most important for learners. When teachers give students meaningful and engaging tasks, students learn more and value that learning. Plus, they will be developing valuable life skills and productive habits of mind that will serve them well in school and in life.

About the authors

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