

Teaching in the Online Environment

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DIGITAL EDUCATION

Key Understandings

The facilitation of education in the 21st Century has changed to meet the demands of the times. This means that instruction has shifted or is shifting from the rote-based, textbook, chalk and talk mode, to one which is more student-friendly, student-focused and one with which students readily identify; the digital and the online environment. This brief will focus on some of the critical best practices which can be employed for teaching and learning in online spaces and in a digital environment.

“Learning must now be recalibrated to thrive in our super digital existence because we perceive learning and life through different lens.”

(Charles, 2020)

THE ONLINE SETTING

Determining the physical/technical requirements of the online environment may seem rudimentary but is critical for smooth-flowing, uninterrupted experiences, which are the core requirements for the online delivery of instruction to primary/secondary/tertiary students.

PHYSICAL & TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

- An uncluttered, distraction-free space without a “busy” background
- A quiet environment which will facilitate clear audio
- Strong, consistent WIFI access and charged device(s)
- Headphones for filtering out noises and for good audio quality
- A device that is capable of adequately running required platforms for teaching/learning; (pre-check for compatibility)
- An assigned learning platform, e.g. Google Classroom or other

PREPARATION

Planning time is critical for successful delivery in online spaces. Use clear, specific objectives in the three domains (***cognitive, affective and psychomotor***) to determine what students are expected to achieve from the teaching/learning time. Adopting a design approach to teaching and learning, enables instructors/facilitators to use time wisely and to employ a range of approaches which are suited to a diverse set of learners. Be aware that in planning, one should determine which activities, as linked to objectives, will be reserved for ***synchronous*** (face-to-face online) and ***asynchronous*** (non face-to-face) sessions.

PRE-LESSON TIME

- Plan for limited screen time by condensing information where possible (40-60 minutes maximum per session; less time for younger students)
- Use fewer strategic objectives in lesson planning and focus on minimizing expectations; this prevents “lesson crowding”
- Clearly state knowledge, skills & attitudes you want students to demonstrate
- Use no more than 3 synchronous sessions per day for the same class
- Communicate topic & expectations prior to start of lesson
- Flip the virtual classroom or utilize flipped learning by emailing or posting reading material or content (video/presentation/graphic) prior to synchronous sessions. Allow students time to reflect on prior information and to prepare question(s) or comments to engage themselves in their own learning

DETERMINE OBJECTIVES

Objectives in the three domains are focused on the following competencies which should guide expected student behaviours:

Cognitive/Knowledge Domain

- Remembering: Recall or recognize information
- Understanding: Understand meaning, re-state data in one's own words, interpret
- Applying: Use or apply knowledge, put theory into practice, use knowledge in response to real circumstances

- Analyzing: Interpret elements and organizational principles, break down structure, see internal relationships
- Evaluating: Assess and judge viability of concepts through critical thinking
- Creating: Develop new unique structures, systems, models, approaches, ideas; creative thinking, operations

Psycho-motor/Skills Domain

- Imitation: Copy action of another; observe and replicate
- Manipulation: Reproduce activity from instruction or memory
- Precision: Execute skill reliably or independent of help, activity is quick, smooth, and accurate
- Naturalization: Instinctive, effortless, unconscious mastery of activity and related skills

Affective/Attitudes Domain

- Receiving: Open to experiences and willing to learn
- Responding: React and participate actively
- Valuing: Attach values and express personal opinions
- Organizing or conceptualizing values: Reconcile internal conflicts; develop value system
- Internalizing values: Adopt belief system and philosophy

SAMPLE WORDS TO GUIDE LESSON OBJECTIVES IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

COGNITIVE	AFFECTIVE	PSYCHOMOTOR
Arrange	Accept	Assemble
Choose	Acknowledge	Respond
Define	Concentrate	Manipulate
Identify	Feel	Create
Listen	Appreciate	Demonstrate
Memorize	Comfort	Formulate
Recite	Cooperate	Arrange
Recognize	Challenge	Show
Classify	Respect	Execute

DETERMINE ROLES: INSTRUCTOR VS FACILITATOR

While in traditional classrooms the focus is often on the lecture and instructor method, the teacher in the online environment truly moves to the student-centred position of being “*the guide on the side*” as the roles of designer and then facilitator of learning become more pronounced. Facilitators engage students in the act of discovering, creating and applying knowledge. This requires strategic planning of the learning process, rigorous research in order to utilize a range of resources suitable for the online environment and a deliberate attempt at creating a collaborative relationship with learners.

FACILITATOR:

Creates positive online learning environment

Is not the fount of all knowledge/does not show self as “content expert”

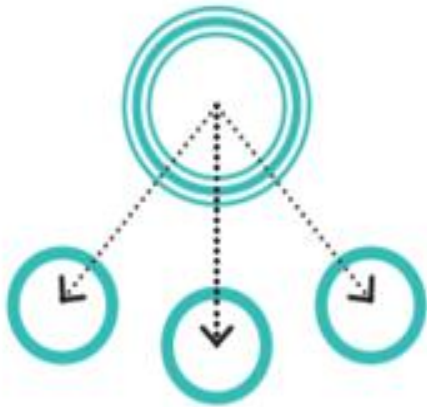
Embraces students’ prior experiences and knowledge

Guides discussion and engages students through activities-based learning experiences

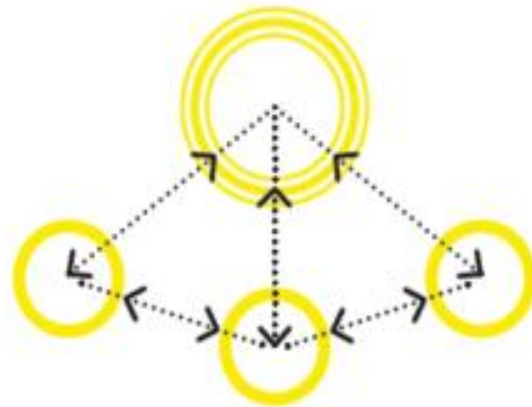
Encourages whole class and small group interaction

Manages the learning process

Teaching vs. facilitating



One directional dissemination of knowledge through a teacher



Accompanying and shaping a learning process together

Source: Adhikari (2019)

THE ONLINE PSYCHO-SOCIAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Getting the most from students in a digital online space requires meeting their psycho-social needs for connection, familiarity and affirmation. Facilitators should:

- engage students socially at the start of class
- create a warm, caring, affirming environment
- establish rules (netiquette) for online engagement (see below)
- avoid flooding students with too much information
- require students' real-time response for assessment via text/images/voice
- make allowances for the digital divide (demonstrate awareness of how some students' home environment/socio-economic status, could negatively impact their ability to access and or maximise online learning)
- provide short breaks between some intense activities and include stretching exercises and bathroom breaks where necessary

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- allow students time to connect socially with each other utilizing the chat and or microphone (prior to the official start of class, during breaks or at the end of class)
 - facilitate breakout group activities utilizing features like Google Meet Breakout Rooms, Zoom Rooms, or by allowing students to collaborate in asynchronous environments for presentation during synchronous class times (students may be encouraged to utilize their own Zoom sessions, private Facebook Messenger Rooms or WhatsApp Groups to collaborate on their own time)
 - end class with positive affirmations

COMMUNICATE STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY

It is critical that teachers be familiar with and emphasize to students the need to utilize best practices for safe engagement in the online environment

Digital Safety and Wellbeing

- Encourage responsible sharing of personal information
- Instruct students to refrain from posting very personal information online
- Develop and promote awareness of student development and management of a positive digital identity
- Establish online class rules and regulations
- Be aware of cyber-stalking on social networks
- Refrain from video recording of students without parental and administrative permissions (age dependent)
- Practise and encourage good posture when using digital devices
- Encourage and plan for digital downtime by limiting screen engagement

Netiquette

While students must be taught good netiquette for the online environment, the most powerful strategy is when this is modelled by the teacher/facilitator:

- Demonstrate warm, cordial and professional engagement with students
- Encourage students to engage in cordial communication with each other and with the teacher

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- Discourage the use of all caps in chat rooms as this is viewed as shouting in the digital environment
 - Discourage cyber-bullying among students (harassment, insults)
 - Encourage ethical/honest use of digital resources; explain plagiarism and enforce discipline when students are found to have plagiarized
 - Encourage students to display empathy and a caring attitude towards peers
 - Encourage students to praise and encourage classmates when required
 - Encourage sharing of resources where necessary
 - Encourage students to dress appropriately for video conferencing sessions
 - Encourage student responsibility in the email names they choose for class work
 - Pinpoint individual students and address them by their names when asking direct questions to strengthen the sense of connection in the digital space
 - Acknowledge and reward positive behavior in the online environment

STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING/FACILITATION

Synchronous Sessions

- Simplify what is to be achieved per lesson since in the online environment *less is more*
- Present information in ways that cater to a range of styles and preferences (visual, auditory, linguistic, psychomotor/skills based). For example, use videos, animated content, podcasts, charts, demonstration and practice activities, text files (PDFs/Ebooks), interactive books, graphics, photographs, Power Point presentations, and online simulations to ensure diverse approaches to content delivery.
- Diversify but do not over-dose one lesson with too many dynamically different approaches; tailor diverse approaches over a series of lessons.
- Assess learning through a range of strategies (quizzes, oral responses, student prepared slides, recorded/real time demonstrations, writing, charts, photos of written work or of drawn/painted artwork etc.)

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- Layer the levels of information presented by moving from simple concepts to more complex to ensure students understand
 - Layer the types of assessment used in the class by utilizing simple questioning to determine student understanding and engagement with simple concepts before moving on to more complex information or more complex forms of assessment

Follow-Up:

- Establish small student-support groups in asynchronous environments, for student consolidation of learning
- Establish "digital office hours" where possible, to provide individual or small group assistance for weaker students or for students who may want further clarification of concepts. This may include meeting with students in a private face-to-face session via Google Meet, Zoom, WhatsApp or other web conferencing tool

Teaching Process

The process towards effective online learning involves the instructor/facilitator's success in establishing a sharing, collaborative relationship with students, who must see themselves as a vital part of the learning experience. Setting out a clear process for student engagement is one way to enlist their cooperation in their own learning.

- Send weekly class overview emails with expected tasks for the week arranged in order of priority; also share this overview with parents (Riley, 2020)
- Share expectations with students at the start of each class
- Allow students (particularly older ones) to share their expectations or goals in the learning experience; these can be submitted as an activity or simply shared orally
- Plan your distribution and delivery process; e.g. you may choose to pre-load content or post links or send out content via email for students to study prior to synchronous learning/activities (flipped learning)
- Create separate digital folders on your device to manage storage of assignments for various classes

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- Divide your synchronous sessions into segments, e.g. use the first half of an hour for direct instruction/explanation/video or presentation viewing and discussion. In second half hour have students do some on-task activity which requires further exploration and or application of concepts exposed to. Strategies for this may include the following:
 - I. writer response: students write in the chat a response to what was viewed or shared and discuss each other's responses
 - II. oral response: students unmute their microphones and respond orally to prompts from the teacher and discuss each other's responses
 - III. students turn on the camera feature on their device and act out, or demonstrate some action (e.g. play an instrument, dance, act, do jumping jacks etc.) according to teacher prompts
 - IV. students draw on their books or papers within a given time period and show what they have done as requested by teacher through their device's camera feature
 - The goal of synchronous learning sessions is to ensure active and not passive student participation. Guard against using an entire session for video or Power Point viewing as students can become bored and disengaged.

Blended and Asynchronous Learning Environments

Blended learning involves the use or *blending* of both synchronous and asynchronous sessions for student learning. It may involve teaching students in real time face to face, teaching them synchronously online, as well as the use of asynchronous activities. Blending of this range of approaches should be influenced by the nature of curricular content and the suitability of activities for the various environments. The school's organization for learning will also influence how approaches are used.

Asynchronous learning activities are done in the students' *own time* outside of real time, online, face to face learning. They can be used as preparation activities as in the flipped learner model or as follow up activities to consolidate what was taught in face-to-face sessions.

Asynchronous activities should have deadlines for completion to encourage student discipline and accountability. Student performance in asynchronous activities

should also inform subsequent lesson planning for synchronous sessions. These activities may include the following:

- Online or traditional book research
- Video viewing with note making; question formulation
- Podcast listening with note making; question formulation
- Creative activities: writing, video recording of performances or demonstrations, drawing, making
- Group work/peer collaboration
- Work sheets/ practice exercises
- Online quizzes and games

Assessment

- Facilitate the submission of work through emails, or through the uploading of assignments to the class's designated online forum.
- Allow older students to create and upload their own content in the online environment to designated teacher-approved sites or social networks. This can include the creation of videos/vlogs; blogs; photos, graphics, infographics, charts, animations, podcasts which can all be used for assessment purposes
- Allow students to use less-intensive apps for collaboration and work submission like WhatsApp, if necessary. Please see below in section on ***Learning Platforms***.

POPULAR LEARNING PLATFORMS FOR TEACHING ONLINE

There are a range of digital platforms used to facilitate online learning. Some must be purchased at the institutional level while several are free for teachers/trainers to utilize at the personal level, as they see fit. Below is a sample of the more popular free platforms as well as some well-known social media tools which can also be creatively utilized for teaching and learning.

- **Edmodo:** an educational website that refines the ideas of a social network and makes them appropriate for a classroom; using Edmodo, students and teachers connect, share ideas and problem solve
- **Eduflow:** allows for building out a collaborative and engaging online learning experience

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- **Collaborize Classroom:** a free educational solution which provides social collaboration and voting tools; it is user friendly and is designed to foster creativity
 - **Google Classroom:** a free web service which helps teachers to create and organize assignments quickly, provide feedback efficiently, and easily communicate with their classes; this service helps students organize and submit their work in Google Drive and allows for direct communication between teachers and students
 - **Google Meet:** free video conferencing software which is a part of G suite and includes screen sharing capabilities
 - **Facebook/Messenger Rooms:** a popular social media tool which can allow for the creation of private Facebook groups to be used as focus groups/discussion groups via posts and comments; Facebook Messenger Rooms can be used to host private groups for video conferencing for synchronous learning sessions
 - **Zoom:** A video conferencing tool for synchronous learning sessions; allows screen sharing
 - **WhatsApp:** a popular social media tool which can keep student groups focused on topics, provide links to websites or videos or allow for summary messages (voice notes) for students to listen to while they can similarly share their thoughts through these audio notes; can also be utilized for students to collaborate on group projects or presentations or for simple submission of photographed work
 - **Nearpod:** an interactive teacher/student engagement platform which allows for the creation and sharing of presentations, videos, quizzes, polls and other web content for the facilitation of learning; it has both free and paid components. This app is web-based and allows for student log-in through a shared code.

DIGITAL TOOLS FOR TEACHING

- Powerpoint/Keynote/Google Slides
- Word/Pages/Google Docs
- Screencastify
- Loom
- Flipgrid

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- YouTube/ SchoolTube
 - Google Forms
 - Quizziz
 - Kahoot!
 - Email

TECH TOOLS, ACTIVITIES, GAMES

- BreakoutEDU
- Gamilab
- Padlet
- Pear Deck
- ClassDojo
- Chrome Music Lab

(Source for Tools: Teaching Online: A Guide for Educators, Educationcloset.com)

TEACHER SELFCARE

While the focus of this brief has been the practical strategies which teachers can apply to online teaching and learning, it is also acknowledged that professional success proceeds from a healthy space. In order to better cope with the many demands of the online environment teachers must, therefore, also look after their physical and emotional well-being. The following suggestions are not exhaustive but provide some general guidelines for boosting teacher self-care in online spaces.

- Create realistic classroom goals which are achievable and time sensitive
- Plan with your peers or co-teach where possible to create a sense of shared responsibility and accountability
- Pare down online classroom activity which may be too intense, by focusing on the basics, to avoid feeling overwhelmed or overtly stressed
- If overtly anxious seek collegial and or professional support
- Join a virtual online learning community in your discipline or start your own in order to garner professional support and to promote professional development

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- Seek technical or resource support when needed; resist the idea that you must be the expert in all things
 - Provide limits for your own screen time between professional and personal use and seek balance between the demands of your personal and professional life
 - Amidst planning and professional responsibilities, carve out time for recreation and relaxation
 - Ensure the application of good ergonomics to your use of technological devices/equipment
 - Get adequate amounts of rest

CONCLUSION

Teaching in the online environment provides a wonderful opportunity for the recalibration of teaching and learning in the 21st Century. Planning for learning or utilizing a design approach for teaching and learning is critical for success in the online environment. This success includes strategically planning for daily classroom processes, consideration of synchronous and asynchronous learning options with respect to curricular goals and carefully blending approaches for the maximization of learning. Attending to the social and emotional needs of students is also pivotal for the establishment and preservation of a healthy learning environment. Of equal importance is teachers' attention to their own physical and emotional well-being, as these are linked not only to increased levels of professional performance but to quality of life.

***“Can we realistically return to our previous inadequate structures, having witnessed firsthand the potential inherent in digital education?”
(Charles, 2020)***

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