

# 10 Ways to Help Your Students Cope with the Transition to Virtual Learning

It's About Much More Than Just the Technology

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March 19, 2020

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**I**f you're concerned about quickly transitioning to the virtual classroom, you are

not alone. Educators and students around the globe are settling in—at home—to finish out the school year in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. For many, the digital classroom is a completely new environment. But there's good news: studies show that learning online is just as effective as learning in the physical classroom, as long as you prepare yourself—and your students—to succeed.

While you'll surely need to focus on how to adapt your lectures, materials, and assignments to better suit the online classroom, it's also critical to think about how your students may struggle to adjust—as individuals and as a group. As you begin your transition to teaching online, consider these 10 ways to become a better leader and resource for your students during this unprecedented time.

# 1. Ensure Your Students Are Equipped Technically

As quickly as you can, determine: Do your students have the technology they need to fully participate in virtual learning? Does every student have access to a device that can perform the functions necessary for online learning, and does that device have the basic software installed to run classroom sessions?

You don't need to have all the technology answers, but you do need to be a resource for your students. Know the contact information for your institution's IT department, and direct students to any assistance services they may require. Ensuring that every student has full access to the resources they need, and can overcome barriers at home to participate effectively online is critical so that no one feels excluded or left behind.

# 2. Give Voice to the Trauma of What Is Happening

The COVID-19 virus—and the mandated social distancing it has necessitated—has created ongoing and escalating consequences and worries for your students. As an educator, you must initially meet them where they are psychologically. Give them space and time to voice the thoughts and emotions they are experiencing before delving into your lessons. Ask students how they are doing. Otherwise, you'll be ignoring the whole reason you're making the transition online—the elephant in the virtual room, as it were—and missing an important moment to connect with your students.

As we know from Greenberg, Clair, and Maclean, professors play an important role in the wake of traumatic events—and many believe that role includes acknowledging

that students are going through emotional and psychological stress. In addressing the ongoing trauma of this pandemic, acknowledge the position you and your students are in and the emotions that come with it. You need to do that before you can ask them to carve out time to continue learning.

No matter how you decide to address the more personal impact of COVID-19 on your students, remind them of the support services available to them through your institution and acknowledge that you are all going through this difficult time together.

### **3. Set Ground Rules Early On**

From the beginning, establish—and sometimes reset—ground rules. You should still ask students not to multitask or check their phones during class, for example. To enforce this, ask students to use video and keep their cameras on throughout class; it really makes a difference. Then get into whatever material you have planned for the day.

Do a “class launch” that sets expectations for this new way of learning—you want to clarify, in detail, how the class will work together online. How should the class communicate and how often? How big should breakout groups be? Ask your students what they think, and take that into consideration as you establish new norms.

### **4. Find New Ways to Check in with Students**

Ensure that students have ongoing opportunities to speak as a group about the new state of affairs—this isn’t a once-and-done conversation. Early on, say something like, *It’s a new world; we’re not sure how long this is going to last, but for the rest of*

*the semester, I want to make sure that everyone feels they have the setup and support they need.*

Remember, too, that with online teaching, there's not just one meeting time, one form of communication, or one medium of conveying messages. Make sure you communicate redundantly to avoid confusion and ensure that everyone has heard and understood you. Follow up with an email or announcement, and have multiple touchpoints (through various media) to keep the conversation going after class.

## **5. Create an Effective Culture for Your Virtual Class**

Building a great online class culture is very important, and very difficult, to do—it requires you to actively work on it. Here are three effective steps to facilitate a supportive culture for your online classroom:

- Make sure students always feel like they know what's going on. At home, they are away from their campus hub and can feel like they've lost touch with what's happening at their school, with their classmates and teachers. Communication is extremely important: send more emails or announcements, implement one-on-one conversations, and encourage more discussions.
- Take care to ensure that students don't feel like they have less access to you than their peers do. Because everyone is at home, their methods of communicating with you may be different. Make sure you are accessible and available to everyone equally. Engage your students more than ever and do it fairly. They need to feel like there's parity among them.
- When you run synchronous class time with the entire group, make sure you're balancing for inclusion and airtime. If you have students who tend to dominate the

conversation during in-person discussions, they're going to dominate virtually as well. Make space for all students to participate. Call on students who are less inclined to speak up when other students are dominating class time.

## **6. Diversify Modes to Enhance Engagement**

During your class sessions, diversify the modes. Every 20 minutes, change how you are engaging your students. Consider using varied modes such as slides, videos, polls, lecture, reflection activities, and simulations. This practice enhances student engagement and breaks up your class time in a productive and vibrant way. You must create this new rhythm for yourself and your students to set expectations for their engagement throughout the class.

## **7. Recognize the Psychological Impact of Screen-Only Learning**

Without the benefit of face-to-face contact, educators and students in online-only environments may feel isolated and lonely. If you and your students were accustomed to having unplanned and informal “hallway” conversations before or after class, you now realize the importance of those interactions to your overall learning experience. Those conversations can have a direct impact on participation and on students’ sense of connection with you and each other, and they can easily go away with remote environments.

How do you recreate those informal social moments? Here are a few ideas:

- Set up online office hours through whichever medium is best for you and your class, be it email, instant chat, or voice and video calling. Make yourself available for student support on a regular and consistent basis just as you would in person.
- Create a virtual “hallway” where students are encouraged to have more candid—but class appropriate—conversations, just as they might have before their in-person classes. For example, you can log in to the online tool you are using a few minutes early and let students know that you will be there then. You can privately instant message with individual students or chat with those who show up early as a group. Alternately, you can implement a separate chat, establish a hashtag for the class, have phone or video calls, or encourage informal engagement on applications like WhatsApp, WeChat, or Viber.

## **8. Proactively Assist Struggling Students**

First, recognize the signs of a struggling student: they’re withdrawn, they’re communicating less. When you see them on video during class time, they are more inhibited. They aren’t participating in class discussions. Then, talk to them; have a conversation—this student may need more engagement and contact from others. Make sure they have what they need. During this time, we need to make sure that, within our classes and broader university communities, there are services available to help students when they need it. Know where to direct students to take advantage of any assistive and support services that your institution may provide.

Students might be feeling that their sense of purpose and community is undermined; when campus life is suspended, students—and educators—can feel like they’re no longer a part of something bigger than just themselves. As leaders, we need to help our students with this, and part of that is being much more visible as a resource.

Through video lectures, discussions, and other communication, be confident and calm. And above all, be available as a resource.

## 9. Trust Your Students

As you make the move to the virtual classroom and begin to teach your students online, keep this in mind: You have to trust your students. This is an era when we should heed Ernest Hemingway's quote, "The way to make people trustworthy is to trust them." You can't always see what your students are doing, but give them assignments, equip them to do their work, check in on them like you have in the past, and know that you're giving them important resources and support during a challenging time.

## 10. Stay Positive

Despite the trying circumstances that are prompting this move to digital learning, remember this important positive aspect: Students are developing virtual skills that will be helpful to them throughout their careers in the digital age. As long as you face this change head on and take advantage of the strengths of online learning, it can absolutely be a successful experience for you and your students.



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