Supporting learners online

You already know how to communicate, inspire students, and support their learning. Online platforms let you use those same skills when face-to-face contact isn't possible. The best way to support learners online is to start with the confidence that you can.

But there are some important **differences and challenges**. Things that online teachers notice include:

- Loss of **signals** from body language, facial expression etc, making it harder to 'read' students individually and as a group. Who is attending? How are they responding? What support do they need?
- Loss of classroom **cues and habits** that help students know when to write, listen, speak, ask for help.
- It can be difficult - it certainly takes more planning - to get students into **groups/pairs** for activities, especially informal discussion and feed back.
- Keeping students **motivated**. Interacting online is tiring, screens can encourage passivity, one-way delivery can become the norm (but not ideal for learning).
- Students may not be used to taking **notes** at a screen, and records of online learning e.g. chat sessions are easily lost . Students may miss class hand-outs they can annotate, for example.
- Students who struggle to engage online are often the ones that have other sources of disadvantage - online can amplify existing **inequalities** and students who need you most may be least visible online.

There are also some potential **advantages**. For example:

- Some students are **more confident** contributors online, especially if you encourage participation in different ways e.g. mic, chat, screen share, poll/quiz, forum post, shared doc, video/photo capture etc.
- All students can **contribute at once** using some of these methods, allowing for more and richer interactions - so long as you encourage and support this.
- Ways of working together have to be made **explicit**, and this can allow you to challenge some classroom habits (e.g. support kinds of group work) and involve students in re-negotiating them.
- It can be easier to integrate **online materials -** content, tasks, apps, games, learning spaces and even other people - opening up the classroom to a wider range of perspectives and activities.

There are skilled professionals with expertise in online and digital learning, and many sources of guidance. Ask what support is available to you. Here are some **strategies** that have worked for other teachers.

- **Prepare students** to study online, with a clear schedule, weekly tasks, easy navigation of course materials (including on mobile devices), and pointers to further support if they need it.
- Start with a warm welcome and **check in** regularly that students are understanding, learning, and feeling OK. Not all students will be comfortable sharing how they feel: check out some low-risk ice breakers.
- Keep live sessions flexible and **responsive**, e.g. asking and answering questions, using response media (polling, emoticons, raised hands) and addressing students' issues and needs.
- Make sure students **produce** something from each online session e.g. notes, diagrams, answers, contributions. Some students will prefer to make notes on paper, others using a screen.
- Offer **explicit** instructions for participation e.g. taking turns, working in small groups, giving feedback, summarising, using chat, sharing links. Don't assume learners know how to participate online.
- Focus on **tasks** that students can do online, live or asynchronously, solo or in small groups, using a range of different apps/software. Set-up, Q&A and reporting back could be in a live plenary session.
- Make students' learning **visible to each other** in collaborative spaces. You can have formal peer review and comment, or just create shared spaces where they can watch each other's work take shape.
- Build in opportunities to **reflect**, both on the content of learning and on the process (especially while it is unfamiliar). Ask students how they have approached different tasks and how it went.
- Create **unstructured time/space** for students to connect with each other e.g. chat window, online 'cafe', social media channel. Use every opportunity to build connection and care.

Two models of learning online

Community building

This model focuses on students' social engagement - their commitment to and trust in the class or group.

Community building dynamic	Activities to try online
Create a sense of belonging	Welcome messages (text/audio/video); ice breakers and introductions; inclusive language; use students' names and encourage personal identifiers (need not be profile photos - start by sharing yours); explain or negotiate rules; keep things consistent; respond to student concerns and anxieties.
Develop relationships	Use directed questions/responses (@[name]) to create dialogue; encourage chat, messaging, live and asynchronous discussion emoticons check in regularly with how students are learning; be flexible and responsive in teaching. Start with some low risk activities to encourage participation(ONE HE guide has examples); set small group tasks in live sessions.
Develop roles	Model - and ask students to take on – specific group roles such as: organise, initiate, question, answer, collect/curate responses, support; discuss issues in group participation and team building. Mix up group membership within the cohort. Try online role play or scenarios.
Establish trust	Collaborative assignments and projects; sharing e.g. of references, topic maps, tips and tricks; peer review of work in progress; negotiate rules and norms (e.g. negotiate an assessment scheme, or turn-taking rules); allow students their own spaces to chat and share. Create shared identity e.g. video montage, playlist, social media channel.
Build networks within and beyond the group	Create an online group identity or identities; find and join useful networks as a group; share learning in public spaces e.g. using tweet chats, vlogs and blogs, wikis, a student journal or magazine ,a public web site.

Knowledge building

This model focuses on students' cognitive engagement - their commitment to the subject they are studying and their own intellectual development.

Knowledge building activities selected from Scardamalia, M. (2002). Collective cognitive responsibility for the advancement of knowledge. In B. Smith (Ed..), *Liberal education in a knowledge society* (pp. 76-98). Chicago: Open Court.

Knowledge building dynamic	Activities to try online
Authentic, meaningful problems	A problem, situation or issue, with links to authentic material (data sets, stakeholder views, other real-world evidence) and a clear brief Online simulation, game or virtual world used to create a problem space for exploration Students take part in in authentic research e.g. open or citizen science Students research aspects of their own context and produce a short video outlining a challenge, question or problem
Present and improve ideas	Ideas put forward as threads in an online discussion; students required to respond to others before posting new ideas of their own Pitch ideas as short videos or pecha kucha presentations Voting on student ideas/solutions/proposals Shared design space to produce a collaborative mind map, diagram, project map or other visual representation Shared document, wiki or annotation platform to build a collaborative text
Use authoritative sources	Students find relevant literature using advanced search features Students explore grey literatures using web sites, repositories and data sets Focus a session on assessing the credibility of online sources with examples, rubrics and criteria of judgement Bring in an outside expert to present/discuss online Students interview an expert in their field (video/audio)
Build community knowledge	Students share and critique each other's sources e.g. using a social bibliography, book shelf or link garden Small groups produce learning or revision materials for the rest of the class, dividing the course into topic areas Curate group contributions, e.g. using flipgrid, a shared blog or social media account, youtube, slideshare, hashtag, Explore alternative ways to present knowledge, e.g. as layers on a map, as wiki notes, as apps or bits of code, as infographics or animations
Build epistemic agency	Students devise (open-ended) questions they want other students to answer, using concepts/methods from the course Students compare, contrast and review solutions to a problem Students create new artefacts to represent their thinking Students collect original data to address a question or reproduce a study in the research literature
Defend positions and justify decisions	Use online video/audio to stage a debate with arguments prepared on either side and voting on the results Students experiment with argumentation and dialogue tools Try an online 'fishbowl' - two students debate from different sides, others can opt in to take the debate in new directions Students use a learning blog to reflect on the limitations, advantages, opportunities and risks of their solution to a problem

What do successful online learners do?

A research review by Beetham and McGill (2016) looked at research on elective online learners, so their success factors may not be the same as for learners who have chosen a face-to-face course.

Successful online learners were found to be ***self-directed, self-efficacious*** (believing that they can succeed through their own efforts) and ***self-regulating*** (monitoring their own efforts and progress). They stay connected, motivated and engaged because they;

- Are curious about the subject
- Experience connection and care through screen-based interactions
- Manage negative feelings about working online e.g. frustration, isolation
- Focus on their own motivation and progress

These capabilities only arise from a having positive experiences of learning over time. They are not a toolkit for success. However, in practical terms these successful online students have habits that can be encouraged:

- View and review course content
- Actively seek help and initiate communications with teaching staff
- Manage their own files, references and notes
- Manage time and attention to task e.g. using apps, lists, calendars, reminders, goals
- Use personal digital tools alongside course platforms and media
- Engage actively with other learners online - initiating, contributing, facilitating etc

The same students who are disadvantaged in other areas tend to have lower levels of digital access (devices, software, data) and fewer positive experiences with digital learning. So it is not enough to know how learners succeed: we need to address existing inequalities so that all learners can have the same chances.

What do online learners find difficult?

In October 2020, a team at UCL (https://pesaagora.com/access/seeking-and-sending-signals/) reported that the move to online learning during the pandemic had left many students struggling to feel motivated, connected, and focused. Again, many of these problems had nothing to do with learners' conscious strategies and everything to do with their experiences - largely negative ones of being forced online during the pandemic. But the same study found that there were some things teachers could do to help:

- Support relatively unstructured, low-stakes, informal interactions among students
- Keep checking that students are OK
- Make academic discourse and practice explicit - *tell* students what to do and *show* them how to do it
- Create opportunities for reflection and review

Further reading

Removing barriers to online learning (useful report and infographics)
Seeking and sending signals (Allison Littlejohn, October 2020)
Short primer on inclusive course design
Knowledge building model for online learning (Scardamalia)
Five stages model for online facilitation (Gilly Salmon)
OneHE Guide to online teaching
ACUE Guide to online teaching
Short activities for student engagement: how many could you deliver online (and how)?
Alternative assessments for authentic learning
Assessment methods from Imperial College - many make use of digital media