

Top tips for online teaching from educators doing it now

BY ROBERT LOW

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Online teaching can be overwhelming, especially when mandated at a moment's notice--here are some tips to help the transition

Organized by SETDA, the State Education Technology Directors Association, the edWebinar included a 2nd grade teacher who had previously taught online only during inclement weather and never expected to be teaching remotely for an extended period. She was followed by a middle/high school teacher and instructional coach at an online charter school, who has more than a decade of experience working online with students and fellow educators.

While each of the educators provided different tips based on the age of their students and the extent of their online work, they also agreed on a number of key points, including the importance of consistency and routines, and of limiting the use of new tech tools in order for online teaching and learning to be effective.

Reaching and teaching young children

Olivia Miller, the grade 2 teacher, works in rural Indiana and said recent changes have “rocked the world” of her students, their families, and her fellow teachers. Given the young age of her students, she makes sure to do daily check-ins on the students’ well-being, including the use of illustrated forms they can fill in about their emotions. She also encourages them to take “brain and body breaks” that include stretching, yoga, and drawing.

Knowing how important it is for her students to interact with her, Olivia does a lot of video and audio communication, and has started organizing portfolios of the videos created by her students. And to provide a stable structure for the school day, she keeps to routines and established office hours, follows the Indiana time recommendations for continuous learning, and disconnects in the evening.

In regard to the online content she provides, Olivia focuses on making it accessible through the use of pictures, emojis, and screen shots. She limits the amount of new formats and programs, knowing students will be stressed if they don’t know what to do, and provides feedback by using built-in comment tools and tagged emails.

From an instructional and assessment perspective, Olivia recommends considering the relative importance of teaching critical skills, developing mastery, and providing grades. Consistency in regard to turning in assignments is needed, but educators also need to think about which excuses are okay, be understanding of family struggles at this extraordinary time, and have a backup plan if there are online access issues.

Setting the course for secondary students

Ashley Webb, the middle/high teacher and instructional coach at an online charter school in Utah, likens the first extended period of teaching online to being a first-year teacher again: “thrown into the deep end and drinking from a fire hose.” And while the experience is difficult and challenging, she also believes it is exciting and cutting-edge teaching.

According to Ashley, consistency is the key to success in a number of respects. She has found consistent and simplified formatting of materials is helpful, at least across each grade if not the entire school. The instructional process should also be consistent, with explicit, step-by-step details that include how long a project should be and how it should be submitted.

Consistent due dates are also important, and at Ashley’s school the teachers have found that having everything due by 6 PM on Fridays works best. There also should be a consistent policy in regard to late work, which at Ashley’s school gets 80 percent credit. Communication with students should balance quality with quantity, keeping in mind that short individualized emails are more likely to be read.

Data use is another key aspect of teaching secondary students online, as it shows what is working and what needs to be changed. This can include student surveys and also tracking which students are participating, what questions are being asked, and how often the same question is being asked by different students. The last data point can identify areas where further clarification or modeling is needed.

Like Olivia, Ashley believes it’s important to set routines and also have boundaries, with time for students and educators to breathe and stretch, and then turning off notifications at the end of the day. She also agrees that sticking with a few familiar tech tools works best, with new ones added in occasionally, as online teaching requires educators to be nimble and adjust without trying to do everything at once.

About the presenters

Candice Dodson is the Executive Director of the State Education Technology Directors Association (SETDA). Prior to joining the team at SETDA, she served as the Director of eLearning for the Indiana Department of Education. In that role, Candice focused on advancing and expanding Indiana’s efforts to take advantage of technology to improve student outcomes. She and her eLearning team worked to boost the state’s efforts to connect Indiana to great ideas in educational technology, virtual and online learning, and new learning models and instructional practices. Her strategic work included the formation of an eLearning Leadership Cadre, statewide professional development opportunities including the Summer of eLearning conferences, Admin Academies, and Digital Learning Grants, and resources and training to support digital learning. Prior to the Indiana Department of Education, Candice had 20 years of experience in a variety of roles from elementary teacher, media specialist, and high ability educator to curriculum and technology integration specialist, central office administrator, and assistant principal. She holds a bachelor’s degree in elementary education from Indiana University, Bloomington, a Master of Education from Indiana State University, Terre Haute, an Administrator Leadership, Administrative Licensure from the University of Southern Indiana, Evansville, and a Leadership Institute Certificate from Brown University, Providence, RI.

Ashley Webb currently works as an instructional coach and graphic design teacher at Mountain Heights Academy, a fully-online 7-12th grade charter school in Utah. She has a decade of online teaching experience. Her bachelor's degree is in technology and engineering education, and she holds Utah teaching endorsements in multimedia, commercial art, commercial photography, IC3/computer technology, and technology and engineering education (CTE/general). Ashley was awarded the Utah Coalition for Education Technology (UCET) Outstanding Young Educator of the Year in 2013, International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) Emerging Leader in 2013, and the United States Distance Learning Association

(USDLA) silver medal for Best Practices in Distance Learning in 2014. Ashley holds current Google Level 1 & 2 certifications and is a Google Certified Trainer.

Olivia Miller is a 2nd grade teacher at South Ripley Elementary School in Versailles, IN. She formerly taught 4th grade for two years, and she was a special education interventionist for three years in Connersville, IN. Olivia teaches in a 1-to-1 tech school corporation that is managed by Five-Star Technology Solutions.

Lisa Cutshall is Director of Partner Engagement at Five Star Technology. She is an educational technology leader with a passion for student learning using innovative digital tools, blended learning models, and data systems. In her current role, she works closely with Google teams to provide strategic planning and professional development for school districts through their Google Partnership and Education Specialization. With over 10 years in public education as a middle school science teacher, technology coach, and Director of eLearning, Lisa is an advocate for student opportunities with technology and computer science. She loves to travel, renovate historic homes, and laugh with family.

About the Author:

Robert Low has more than 30 years of educational publishing experience, ranging from editing and product management to online advertising and content development. He also works with edWeb.net to write articles on their professional learning edWebinars.