

Supporting Students and Their Families

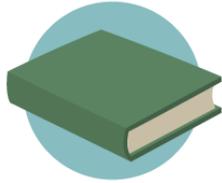
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Supporting Diverse Learners

Every student that enters your classroom is unique, with different needs and ways they learn best. Just as you would in your face-to-face classroom, you should build your online classroom to allow each student to have a personalized learning experience.

Differentiated instruction techniques can be applied in the online classroom. Differentiation techniques provide you with tools and approaches for personalizing shared content in an efficient and effective way. When you apply these techniques, you're not only better meeting the needs of your students—you're also contributing to the needs of your school and community as a whole.

Resources



Reading: [Differentiating Instruction in an Online Classroom](#)

This article offers suggestions for differentiating instruction in the online classroom. While the article is aimed at online adult learners, the strategies will work just as well for most student populations. The key is to think about what each individual student needs, and then figure out how to bring that content to them.



Website: [Using E-Learning to Engage Introverts](#)

In an online setting, K-12 students may be reluctant to engage with the material or their teacher. This article explores strategies you can use to get the conversation going with these more reluctant students. While this article was written for people working with introverts, the methods suggested can be applied to engage hesitant online participants of all ages.



Reading: [How to Use Technology to Support ELLs in Your Classroom](#)

This reading provides examples of technologies that you can use to support English-language learners (ELLs) in your online classroom. This includes some tools that aren't ELL-specific, but may have ELL-friendly supports built in.

Communicating with Students and Parents

Your relationship with K–12 students and their parents is a professional relationship, focused on student needs and expectations—just like the relationship that teachers, students, and their families have at brick-and-mortar schools. And no matter whether you’re teaching online or in person, the more insight you have into a student’s background and home situation, the better positioned you’ll be to help the student learn.



Choosing a Mode of Communication

Outside of using an online classroom, teachers primarily communicate with students and parents by phone, email, and text messaging. Using a combination of these three communication tools works well for most teachers. For teachers, though, it’s not always clear when to use one specific tool over another, and how to take full advantage of each tool. Consider the pros and cons of each mode of communication for different types of information you may need to convey.

Phone:

- Pros:
 - More direct
 - More personal
 - Allows for immediate feedback from listener
 - Lets both parties ask clarifying questions
 - Allows speakers to correct misunderstandings quickly
 - Much easier to convey and interpret tone (humor, concern, seriousness)
- Cons:
 - Requires caution: Easy to misspeak in the moment
 - Less predictable: Less chance to prepare what you’ll say in real-time discussion
 - Lacks visual component (if speaking by phone): Can’t read body language or facial expressions

Email:

- Pros:
 - Convenient: Sent when you want, read when the other person has time
 - Allows for careful choice of words, can be edited before being sent
 - Becomes a record of communication for later reference
- Cons:
 - Very difficult to convey or interpret tone
 - Doesn’t feel as personal
 - Even carefully written messages can be misinterpreted

Text Messaging:

- Pros:
 - Fast—usually seen quickly by receiver
 - Short and to the point—good for quick, focused exchanges
- Cons:
 - Some schools prohibit the use of text—check your school’s policy!
 - Limits what can be said and explained
 - Is very informal—not always good in a professional context
 - Can get lost by people who receive many texts
 - May not be taken as seriously as an email or a call

Keeping Track of Communications

If you’re like most people, it can be tricky to remember details about people you speak with only occasionally. When you have many of students and parents, keeping track of what you learn about them is impossible without the strategic use of tracking tools. Using the right tools and being organized will help you manage and work effectively with large numbers of students.

What do I need to keep track of and why?

Document all communications that you have with students and parents.

- This lets your teammates who work with the same family know what’s going on and what information has already been shared or received. This is important on both a practical and relationship level, for both efficiency and sensitivity. Another teacher accessing the record will learn useful information, ranging from a missing assignment that was already discussed to a recent death in the family that explains a student’s recent absence. This helps your colleagues *and* the student, for fairly obvious reasons:
 - It helps you avoid overwhelming families with unneeded information or bothering them for information already in their record. The notes will tell you what’s been discussed and shared.
 - It alerts you to be mindful of sensitive situations. If a family member’s illness has been noted, you’ll already know this from the record and be able to speak compassionately.
- Also, be aware of the following:
 - If a problem related to a student or parent is escalated, a detailed record of the communications will be available that can correct wrong assumptions caused by a lack of evidence.
 - Information in a school record can be subpoenaed and therefore used in legal situations.

Parents as Partners: Encouraging Effective Study Habits at Home

Students must dedicate time to learning every school day. Each student learns a little differently from everyone else, and at their own pace. Still, there are universal, proven practices that you can share with parents to help students make the best use of their home study time.



Study Techniques

Recommend the following to encourage your students to establish good study habits:

- **Devote focus time.** Set a timer (as little as 5 to 10 minutes at first). The student must read, write, or do the assigned task until the timer goes off. They may not talk to anyone during this time, but may write down questions to discuss later. When the timer goes off, the student may ask questions, or the parent can ask about “big ideas” the student just learned.
- **Devote break time.** Set a timer for 5 to 15 minutes. The student and parent can get up and exercise, play, listen to some music, or talk. Move away from the learning area. Return promptly to study when break time is up.
- **Test first.** At the beginning of a new lesson, the parent gives a brief, ungraded quiz on materials provided by the teacher. At the end, the parent gives answers, and the student notes the correct answers. The parent can then pull questions from the reading to further learning.
- **Mix it up.** For foundational concepts, the parent gives the occasional brief, ungraded quiz or asks the student to summarize concepts. This promotes deep learning.
- **Study more frequently.** Instead of working hard on perfectly memorizing one set of information, for instance, the student may memorize two or three items. When the student returns to study, recall the new items to fix them in memory. Recall all of what was already memorized, every time.
- **Get enough sleep.** The parent sets an alarm one hour before a good bedtime for the student. The student then puts away all work and electronic devices and completes washing and changing into pajamas immediately. When the night routine obligations are complete, the student may have free time for reading, low-volume music, or other quiet activities until lights out.
 - **Note:** Ending screen time well before bedtime is essential for quality sleep. Devices should spend the night turned off and out of bedrooms. Encourage parents to set a good example!

Parents as Partners: Setting Up a Productive Home Learning Environment

You don't need to have an empty home office to set up a productive learning environment. You can set up an effective learning space in many places throughout the house: in a shared living space such as a living room or kitchen, in the child's bedroom, or even in an outdoor space such as a porch or a deck, to name just a few. There are some elements that are helpful (but not required) in all learning environments, though. Ultimately, the learning space should be as free from distractions as possible, organized, and comfortable.



Minimizing Distractions

- **Cell phones.** Try to remove cell phones from the learning area.
- **Electronics** can be a major distraction. Remember to keep them turned off during “school time.”
- **Temperature.** A room that's too hot or too cold can often be a distraction. Most people prefer a room temperature of 68 to 74 degrees Fahrenheit for optimal learning.
- **Traffic.** Setting up a work space in a high-traffic area, such as near the refrigerator or the bathroom, can create distraction. If possible, try to move the workspace into a quieter area of the home.

Increasing Productivity

- **Natural sunlight.** Consider establishing a space near a window.
- **Lighting.** A desk lamp or other source of good lighting is important for a productive learning environment.
- **Storage.** A bookcase or a place to store learning materials is helpful to have nearby so they're easy to locate.
- **Plants.** The presence of plants has a calming effect on people of all ages.

A Dedicated Space for Learning

- **Clutter.** A room does not have to be perfectly clean to be a productive learning environment. However, avoiding clutter whenever possible is important as it can distract students from concentrating and being productive.
- **Desk chair.** The chair a learner sits on can have a major impact on learning. Being comfortable in their chair is crucial to success.
- **Wall décor.** Busy walls can often be a distraction. Consider posting pictures of animals, nature, or inspirational quotes for a positive learning effect.