



PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR
**TEACHERS OF ONLINE
K-12 STUDENTS**

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SNHU’s Workforce Partnership’s team collaborates with employers to create education solutions that help attract, develop and retain top talent at every level of the organizational chart. First in the nation to offer both competency- and credit-based pathways for diverse learning styles, SNHU empowers working adults to succeed in frontline or leadership roles with highly flexible, affordable programs delivering the work-relevant skills they need. Other tailored solutions include talent acquisition, research and consulting.

Learn more about K12’s partnership with SNHU and M.Ed. in Online Instruction and specializations designed specifically for eligible K12 educators: snhu.edu/k-12-teachers



ADAPTING TRAINING AND EXPERIENCE TO THE **UNIQUE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT**

Recent years have seen tremendous growth in K-12 school districts offering online instruction. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 19,000 schools in the U.S. offered at least some courses entirely online in 2016, and 5.7 percent of those — 1,083 schools — offered all their courses online.

Another analysis by Education Week found that 2.7 million U.S. K-12 students took supplemental online courses in 2015.

Whether a program is entirely online or in a hybrid format, virtual classrooms enable school districts to meet the needs of students and parents who require flexible school arrangements. According to Daniel T. Tanguay, senior associate dean of academics at Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), the shift toward online teaching has also been driven in part by teacher shortages in some subjects or communities. Online education allows qualified teachers to provide remote support to students in those communities.

That growth of online K-12 instruction means teachers must adapt their training and experience to the unique differences in the online environment. “Current teacher preparation programs focus on the typical classroom setting,” he said. “Emerging specialized programs emphasize how to be an effective instructor in an online environment.”

Marcus Vu, adjunct education faculty at SNHU, said that while parents have many online choices for K-12 education, “there has been a gap in what we teach the teachers of the future — and even current teachers — so they can be effective and successful online.”

Vu and the other faculty interviewed here are part of SNHU’s M.Ed. in Online Instruction program, which covers curriculum development and strategies for successful online instruction. They teach courses on topics like data-driven instruction, using technology in online education, nurturing online learning communities and digital privacy laws.

So Vu, his faculty colleagues and Associate Dean Tanguay have developed a range of practical advice for online teachers. Here they share advice on subjects like time management, engagement and assessment. This short guide will cover:

- **Essential skills for online K-12 teachers**
- **Managing limited time as an online teacher**
- **Engagement strategies for online teachers**

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ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR **ONLINE K-12 TEACHERS**

In truth, every skill essential in a traditional classroom is essential to an online teacher. Technology introduces a modern element, but “old school” principles still apply. But distance learning can bring these principles into sharp relief, pushing teachers to learn new instructional practices that aren’t always easy to anticipate.

“For example, you don’t have the direct contact you would face to face,” Tanguay said. “From that difference, dozens of other decisions follow, down to the camera angle and the lighting in the teacher’s office.”

Monitoring progress

Successful online teachers learn to interpret and use the data collected in the learning management system.

For example, a basic distinction a teacher can make is between learning data and behavioral data. Learning data includes the results on practice activities and tests. Behavioral data can show time on task, log-in times or if the student engaged with supplementary materials.

With that distinction in mind, if a student has an F grade, the teacher can ask if the clue to the problem is in the learning data or the behavioral data.

“A student at 25% complete right now would concern me if we’re in the last quarter of the term,” Vu said. If they haven’t logged in for a week, that’s probably a sign they are neglecting the work. But for another student, the data might show they are logging in regularly without progressing. That suggests they are struggling with the content and need individual tutoring.

The online K-12 teacher learns to dig deeper into data to assess what hinders or supports a student’s progress. “This enables an online teacher to be proactive versus reactive,” Vu explained.

Giving written feedback

When a teacher sees a student every day in the classroom, they’re able to interpret demeanor and body language to assess if information is being taken in.

But in a context where text messages, email, phone calls or online chats take the place of face-to-face communication, it can be harder to judge what is getting through.

“When you’re communicating through email, you don’t want to overwhelm the student with too much information, Tanguay said. “It needs to be focused, concise and positive.”

Individualized written communication takes time, but poor communication is even less efficient. When online educators develop effective communication skills, they have more time to work with all students and to develop creative lessons.

“Feedback enables the teacher to enrich the curriculum for those who are struggling and for those who are accelerating,” Vu said.

Feedback should help students learn from their mistakes so they’re motivated to learn more. “When I give robust feedback, students want to talk about it,” Vu said. The feedback reinforces the communication and engagement between student and teacher.

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Teachers also can't make assumptions about which form of communication works best for each student, Vu noted. "If a student is 12 weeks into the term and hasn't submitted a single assignment, then the emails haven't worked," Vu said. "A phone call to a student is going to have more impact."

Meanwhile, online K-12 teachers have to be communicating effectively with the student's parents or other supports such as a coach working for a home-schooling cooperative. Those other supports can give teachers information about where the student may be having difficulty so the teacher can rework the content, Tanguay said.

Building motivation

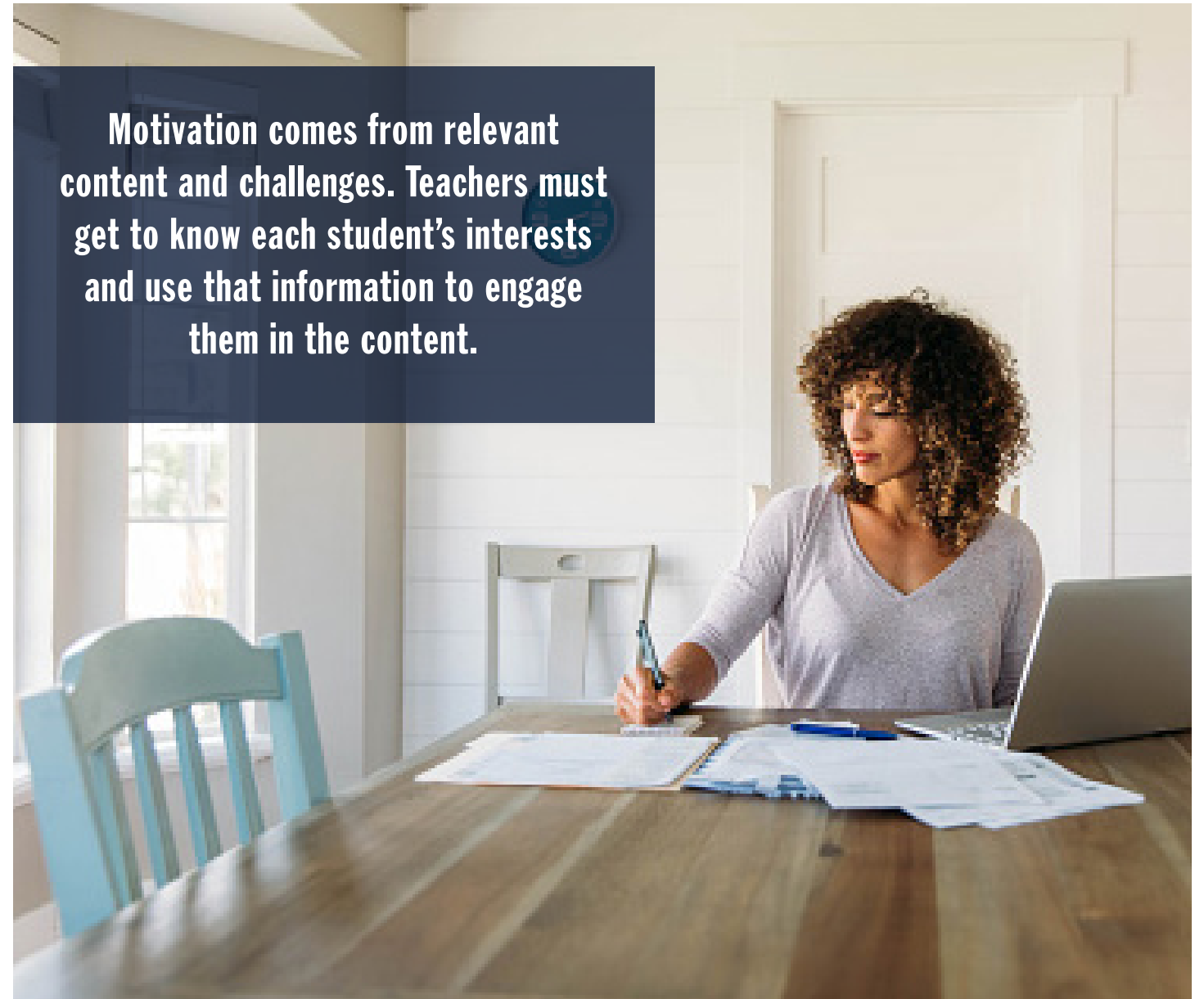
Motivation comes from relevant content and challenges. Teachers must get to know each student's interests and use that information to engage them in the content.

"I always gather information about what they're passionate about," Stephanie Schaefer, adjunct education instructor at SNHU, said. "If I'm doing a live synchronous math lesson, and I know they like soccer, I'll bring that topic into the instruction."

Daniel Tanguay agreed that the more a teacher can connect the lesson to the student's interests and real life, the more inspired the student will be. "When you personalize learning and make it realistic to them, that is going to pique their interest and motivate them," he said.

For example, he suggests that students can create an introductory post about themselves at the start of the course, based on prompt questions. That gives the teacher insight about individual interests and goals.

There's more to online teaching than delivering the curriculum and giving feedback, Vu said. "You have to get to know them and understand what they're going through so you can help them learn."



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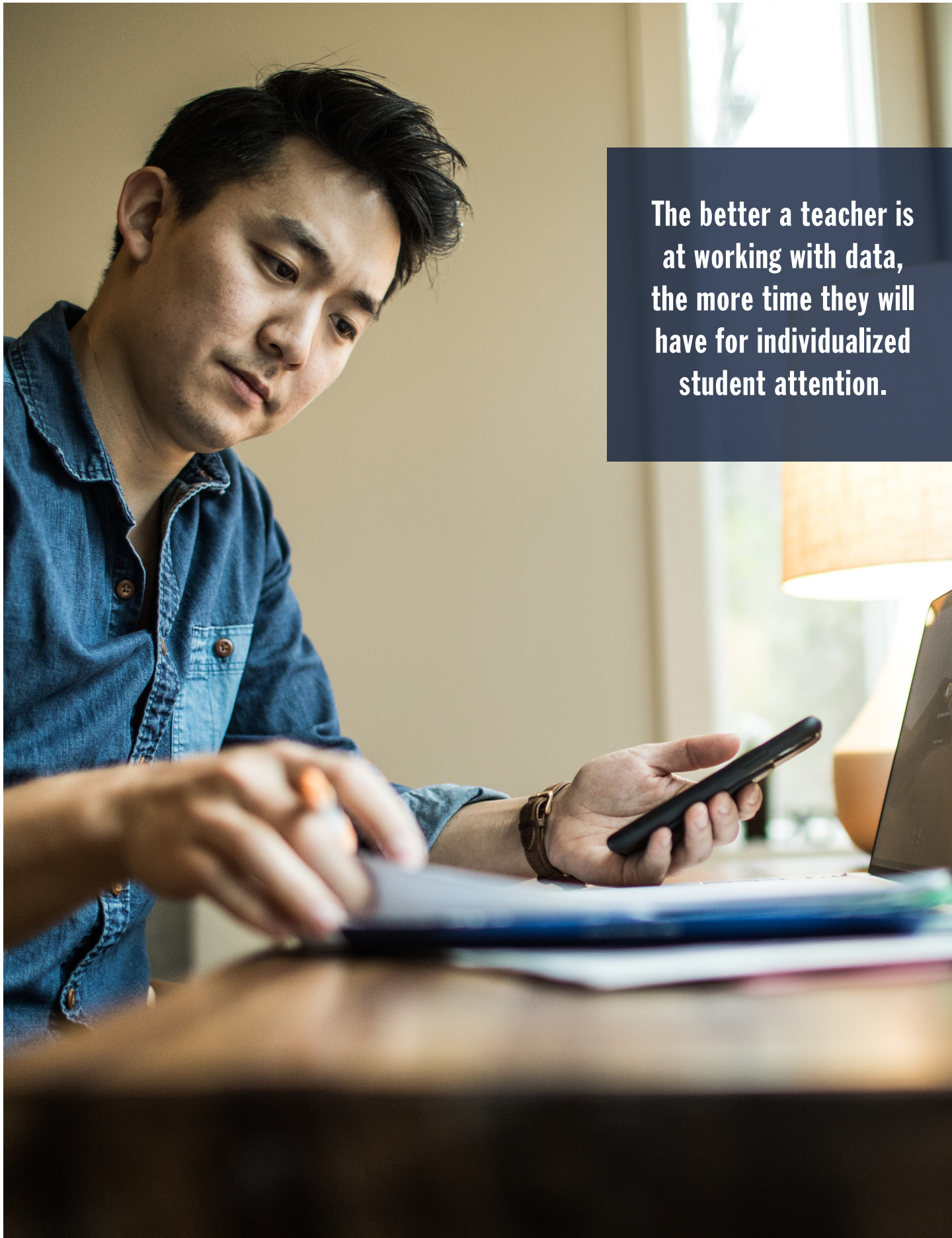
Forming professional networks

The most successful online teachers are skilled at reproducing the teachers' lounge, where they can connect with their peers. They build professional relationships they can draw on to deal with new challenges or to get new ideas to use in their classes.

Students in SNHU's M.Ed. in Online Instruction and specializations benefit from working with practitioners in the field and forming a professional network, said Valerie Schmitz, adjunct professor at SNHU. Instructors work and learn with their peers, which helps build the knowledge base of each.

"Having that network of peer collaborators is critical because being an online teacher can be rather lonely," she said.

Schmitz's expertise is in policy and administrative development in her state, and she connects regularly with a peer who is a lead for a statewide virtual school program. "When there is a question on an assignment or interpreting content, I have a thought partner I can turn to," she said. "That's been fantastic."



The better a teacher is at working with data, the more time they will have for individualized student attention.

MANAGING LIMITED TIME AS AN ONLINE TEACHER

Most teachers have already developed techniques — in their teacher education programs or through hard-earned experience — to manage packed school-day schedules. But the transition to teaching online presents new time management challenges.

“A run-of-the-mill teacher prep program might teach a course on classroom management, and those competencies are tied to managing a face-to-face, physical classroom,” Vu said.

There’s a big difference with the online environment, he explained. Instead of managing a group of 30 students in a physical classroom, online instructors have 30 individual relationships.

Of course, the most effective way to free up more time is to be very competent in other areas. For example, consider one of the topics discussed in more depth above: analyzing student data. The better a teacher is at working with data, the more time they will have for individualized student attention.

That said, there are a number of practical time management techniques new online teachers can use:

Keep a chart of student interests handy

Tanguay said online teachers should list each student’s learning interests in a chart and have it nearby for quick reference.

For instance, if a student asks for clarification, the teacher can tailor their feedback to the student’s interests. “If my chart says Mary loves music and you are trying to provide examples of various patterns,” Tanguay said, “you can have her listen to a song to identify the beat and then place a number sequence to it. Additionally, you can show her a visual representation of the song using a YouTube click track to create a more universal approach to learning.”

Set priorities

Schaefer said she keeps a written log of how she spends her time. That helps her see what tasks are taking attention away from her priorities.

For example, at one time her log showed how much time it took to respond to email. Schaefer decided she needed a more priority-oriented approach. Instead of going through every email, she moved messages from students to the top of her to-do list. “You hit those things that have to be done now and the lower priority tasks go to the bottom of the list,” she said.

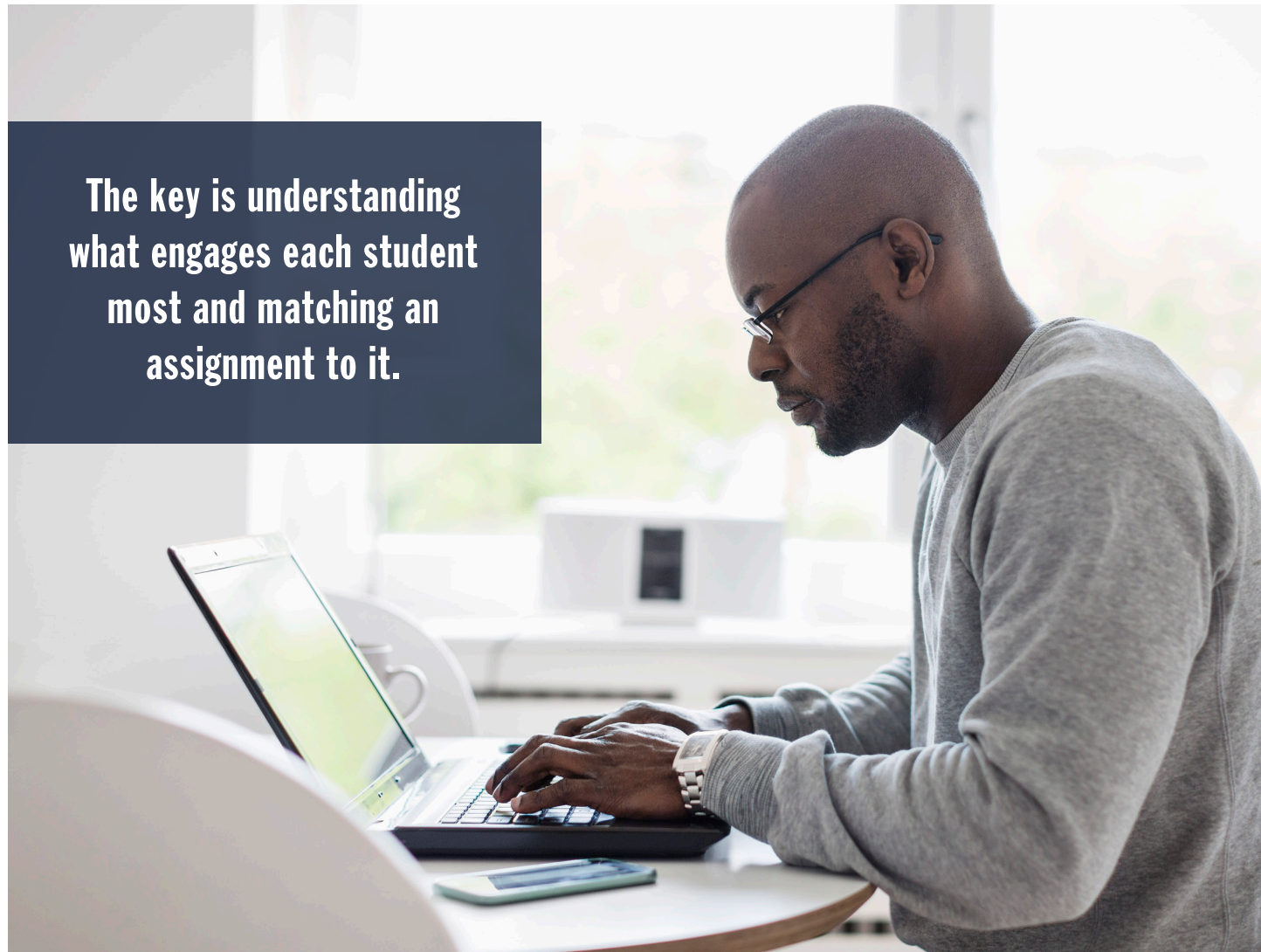
SELF-ASSESSMENT IN ONLINE INSTRUCTION

Not only do online instructors assess how students are doing, they must also evaluate the success of their own teaching. Or, as Schaefer described it, online instructors must be “reflective practitioners” who continually analyze how effective they are.

“You have to go back and look at what might not have worked so well,” she said. “Then, when you design your next lesson, you’ll know to be more explicit on the instructions, for example.”

Schmitz said online teachers can assess whether students have mastered the content by their grades on state assessment tests. “If my students are surpassing those of traditional school, I’m doing pretty well,” she said. “If I’m doing the opposite, I have to re-examine my instruction.”

The key is understanding what engages each student most and matching an assignment to it.



Organize around weekly goals

Vu recommends thinking strategically about which communication goes to everyone on an announcement page and which messages are individualized. He usually begins the week with announcements and then transitions to targeted messages to students or small groups.

That is informed by the goals for the week and monitoring that progress. “As progress becomes more critical,” he said, “you use closer forms of communication, like text messages and phone calls.”

Organized this way, Fridays can be devoted to a check-in either by email or text to see if the student has achieved the goal. If not, student and teacher discuss what needs to be done over the weekend.

Align curriculum to district and state standards

Schmitz advises online teachers to make sure that quizzes, projects and other assessments are closely aligned with their district or state standards. Never spend time on a learning check without being clear on what learning goal it measures.

“An exercise in our 600-level class is to identify relevant assessment strategies so that a test or a project gives a clear idea of how students are performing,” she said. “That way, teachers aren’t spinning their wheels and using assessments that might not give them accurate information.”

ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR ONLINE TEACHERS

Personalization

Every educator learns that personalized learning experiences promote engagement. For example, Schmitz explained, common approaches to personalized instruction include game-based learning and small-group work so students have peers to collaborate with.

“Those are all strategies we would use in a face-to-face environment, but in an online environment we need to be able to tweak and modify those so they can be utilized digitally,” she said.

What’s more, each student processes instruction and demonstrates their comprehension differently. Some may be visual learners. Others prefer reading the content.

A student can demonstrate subject-matter knowledge by making a video, a written essay, or a group project. The key is understanding what engages each student most and matching an assignment to it.

“If we ask for a writing activity to demonstrate progress from a student who is not a good writer, but they understand the content, a video or some other mode of demonstrating their knowledge might be better for them,” Schmitz said.

Human connection

Online teachers must imagine how the content works online, Vu said. “Is the content best facilitated in an asynchronous website or as lessons within a module? Or, should it be facilitated live in a synchronous session?”

Tanguay said, “You don’t want this to be just a student engaging with a piece of technology. The goal is that students feel like they are actually working with a person, not a computer.”

For example, SNHU faculty work with K-12 teachers to use breakout sessions and chat rooms effectively, Tanguay said.

Online learning encourages engagement

Schaefer said online classes have some advantages over in-person classes, particularly in the way they encourage more active learning.

“When you think about online instruction, the student is spending a lot less time listening to a lecture,” she said.

Another advantage of online education is that it allows every student to participate simultaneously via chat and quiz functions. In a traditional classroom every student talking at once is discouraged.

That means teachers often must move on from a topic without checking in that all the students have grasped the concept. But in a synchronous online class, a teacher can see comments or quick knowledge-check responses from every student and know if more attention is needed. That lets the teacher adjust the pace of instruction if necessary.

With the right professional development and adjustments, many teachers, Schaefer said, “will find there’s more individualized time to dive deeper into topics or give additional information a student may need.”

Online education and learning is becoming more prevalent as more students and their families choose this format. For this reason, K12 partnered with SNHU to ensure their educators receive the professional development they need.



THE KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Written communication to online students has to be focused, concise and positive.
- Online teachers must be skilled at analyzing student data to monitor progress.
- The most successful online teachers build networks of peers for professional support.
- Manage time by having a chart handy with each student's interests.
- Manage time by keeping a time log, which can reveal ways to improve.
- Think strategically about which communication is announced to every student and which messages are individualized.
- Never spend time developing an assessment activity without being clear on how it aligns with the learning standard.
- Match assessment activities to interests to promote engagement.
- Effective use of chat rooms can create personal connection.
- Online education has many advantages over the classroom if teachers know how to use it.
- Online instructors must continually reflect on and analyze how effective they have been.
- Every skill essential in a traditional classroom is essential to an online teacher.

Credits

Researching and writing by Maria Wood and McGuire Editorial Content Marketing Agency.

Sources:

¹ https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ntps/tables/Table_3_042617_fl_school.asp

² <https://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/online-classes/index.html>

