



The Essential Guide to Distance Teaching

Best practice strategies for
new distance teachers



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Introduction:

At some point during your career you are almost guaranteed to be assigned the daunting task of coordinating learning remotely.

This puts educators in an extremely difficult position. Not only do most classroom teachers lack formal training in distance teaching, but what little research there is surrounding K/R-12 distance education confirms that it is a complex and challenging means of instruction.

These challenges, however, do not translate to an inferior model for teaching and learning. Quantitative studies have sought to compare the results of students enrolled in distance education programs with those of students in regular classrooms, and no conclusive evidence has been found to suggest that one method of teaching is better than the other (Cavanaugh et al. 2004).

What's more, distance education does have its own advantages. Not only is it flexible enough to accommodate learners with special needs or those with commitments that make regular classroom attendance difficult, but it can also be a powerful way of developing self-discipline.

Yet without careful teacher implementation, distance education can be an isolating and disengaging experience. It's therefore important to employ best practice in order to ensure that student learning doesn't suffer outside of a standard classroom environment.

This eBook will take you through the best practices for creating a dynamic and positive environment for distance education. Whether you are catering to an individual, or a whole class learning from home, these strategies will empower you to deliver powerful learning experiences to your students no matter what the distance is between you.



The Four Levels of Interaction in Distance Teaching

In 1989, Michael G Moore – a leading scholar in the field of distance education – outlined three different levels of interaction that inform any distance teaching experience. Although our 21st century technologies and pedagogical methods are more sophisticated than Moore could have predicted, these interactions are still vital to understand if you want to teach effectively from a distance.

They are:

1. Learner–Content Interaction

The bedrock of any teaching situation, distance or otherwise, is the interaction between the learner and the content that is being taught. For distance teachers, this is the material in our curricula and teaching sequences — the knowledge and skills that our students need to assimilate, whether they are in class or not.

2. Learner-Teacher Interaction

Students need direct interaction with their teacher in order to succeed in distance education. As their teacher, you remain a vital source of motivation and instruction.

3. Learner–Learner Interaction

Effective distance teaching also rests on students' ability to communicate with each other. Historically this has been overlooked, but modern technology now makes it possible for you to bring the best parts of dynamic classroom interaction into online learning environments.

And there's one more interaction that's vital in 21st century distance teaching...



4. Learner–Interface Interaction

Hillman, Willis and Gundawardena (1994) observed that student relationships with the actual technology being used in distance teaching was equally important in determining student levels of achievement. We all know what it's like to grapple with frustrating software, so it's important to ensure students have positive relationships with the delivery platform itself if we want them to learn from a distance.

To conduct distance teaching effectively, we need to take **all** of these different interactions into account.

The result looks something like this:



The four-way interaction model of distance teaching

In the following chapters, we will break down these interactions individually and provide you with strategies to ensure that they are both positive and productive.

Learner–Content Interaction:

Keeping Motivation Alive

No amount of distance teaching tools and tricks will make a difference if your students do not actively engage with the content itself. This is likely the biggest concern for most new distance educators, who wonder to what extent students can be trusted to learn in the absence of constant teacher supervision and management.

Students need motivation in order to independently engage with the learning content in a distance teaching situation. Some will be intrinsically motivated and well placed to succeed without teacher intervention, but others will need a push in the right direction.

Consider the following strategies:

Using parents as motivators

Parents are invaluable when it comes to motivating students in a distance teaching situation. They are the ‘eyes in the room’ in your absence and will be the first ones to notice if their child’s effort or engagement start to waver. A 2001 study of 28 Australian students observed that those who regularly engaged with an adult supervisor during the learning process exhibited far higher levels of achievement than students who had relatively little adult support (Frid 2001).

Set the tone for a productive parent/teacher partnership right from the outset by briefing parents on where they can access the learning content. They should be able to see what their child is working on and any assignments that might require following up at home. You can also provide parents with a list of strategies to support their child’s continued learning, such as:

- reminding them of due dates
- rewarding/praising them for task completion
- encouragement
- responding to poor effort or conduct
- setting up a comfortable learning space
- talking regularly with their child about their learning

Remember that school closure is a challenging time for parents who are forced to balance their child’s education with existing work and home commitments. Do not plan your distance teaching around the assumption that parents will be constantly available, or able to help in the actual teaching of curriculum content. Embrace the help that they can offer without asking too much of them.



Reward engaged and active learners

Your capacity to address poor effort and conduct is diminished in a distance teaching situation, so it's important to focus on rewarding students who do the right thing instead. Praise them with direct comments and messages when they complete set tasks or ask engaging questions. Use GIFs, animations and emojis to make things even more positive and personable.

You can also use the flexibility of online distance teaching to your advantage and adjust learning activities according to good conduct. Some incentives might be letting students leave (digital) class early, crowdsourcing suggestions for your next activity, or letting students pick their own groups for a collaborative activity.

Participation assessment for motivation

In order to motivate older students, you can assign an on-balance mark for their engagement with the distance learning process and have it included in their overall assessment. It's not dissimilar to the participation marks that many of us use in our regular classrooms. Here is a sample grid that you could use to assess online participation in distance teaching:

	High	Satisfactory	Poor
Collaboration with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Regularly contributes to discussion and chat boardsResponds to and seeks feedback from others in a productive manner	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Makes sporadic or cursory contributions to class chats and discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Does not engage with others
Completion of set activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Completes all set activities, on time and to a high standard	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Completes most set activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Does not complete set activities or does so, but to a poor standard
Engagement with learning material	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Accesses all posted resources in a timely mannerAttends all scheduled online activitiesContacts teacher with questions where necessary	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Accesses most resources and attends most scheduled online activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Seldom engages with the online learning process and is frequently absent

Marking students on their engagement will keep them motivated and accountable for their learning. Younger students may not be as well served by something as formal, but a virtual 'gold star' system can work wonders

Learner–Teacher Interaction:

Instructional Strategies to Promote Online Engagement

Early models of distance teaching relied upon learner–content interaction alone. Think of courses on CD, video, cassette, or even the humble textbook. However, studies have indicated that direct engagement between teachers and students is a critical aspect of distance teaching and that students are likely to feel isolated and confused without it (Weiner 2003).

Teachers will hardly be surprised by the news that their role is important, yet the research has also suggested that common distance teaching practices do little for student engagement. Liu (2008) pointed to teachers’ tendencies to rely on a ‘mono-communication method’ focused around text alone, as well as a hands-off instructional approach where students are left to complete uploaded material independently. Furthermore, Kapitzke and Pendergast (2006) observed that teachers were less likely to differentiate their instruction in online learning environments. Evidently the default practices employed in many distance teaching situations are not the best ones.

Fortunately, advances in technology make it far easier for you to sustain powerful student–teacher relationships outside of the classroom, provided you abide by these best practice strategies

Maintain visibility via video and audio

If you rely on text alone to communicate with students, you lose the personal rapport that comes with face-to-face contact, not to mention all the subtleties that come with verbal communication. It also undermines that distinct sense of teacher presence that is a motivating factor.

Treat it like a flipped classroom and post the content-heavy components of your instruction as video lectures. Not only does this give students the opportunity to see your face, but it also saves you the time of having to painstakingly type out word-heavy content.



Provide timely feedback

With feelings of isolation being the biggest threat to distance learning, regular and personal teacher feedback is paramount. This should be written as opposed to taking the form of marks exclusively, in order to send the message that you are still personally invested in their learning from a distance.

You should also consider the fact that feedback needs to be delivered safely and privately in an online setting. Publishing individual feedback where all other students can see it (ie, in a discussion forum) may leave individuals feeling self-conscious and less likely to submit work in the future. Email or private messaging is a good option to ensure that your students don't lose face when you critique their work.

Remember that feedback is not just confined to assessment either. Ordinarily, when a student makes a comment or asks a question in class, you respond immediately. You should strive to maintain the same practice in an online setting instead of leaving discussion board posts and questions unacknowledged for days at a time. For this reason, scheduling live, virtual class times is a good idea: it lets students know that they will have your full attention and availability, and it keeps the flow of a discussion alive as if were happening in real time.

Personal engagement

The best distance learning environments keep the 'small talk' that usually takes place in a lively and connected classroom. It's a way of showing your students that you still share a personal connection beyond the business of straight-forward instruction. This will be especially welcomed amidst the stressful circumstances that triggered school closure in the first place.

You can do this during discussion activities or check-ins. Keeping the mood friendly and taking the time to talk with students about non-academic matters can have a positive effect on their overall course engagement (Turbill 2002).



Learner–Learner Interaction:

Creating a Sense of Community

Moore (1989) suggested that the ‘distance’ in distance teaching is more psychological than geographical in nature. It hardly matters whether your students are next door to one another or in different cities — the same sense of distance is still keenly felt as learners do not have the opportunity to interact with one another.

For this reason, effective distance learning environments have been strongly correlated with student perceptions of community (Liu 2008, Croft, Dalton & Grant 2010). They allow learners to share ideas, ask questions of one another, and ‘socially mix’ via a digital platform.

Consider the following strategies to build community in your digital classroom:

Writing activities

Assign students a periodic writing or reflection activity that they can regularly share with you or their peers during the distance teaching period. This does not have to be explicitly tied to the content itself, as the goal is simply to increase connectivity via regular sharing.

For example:

- a digital version of classroom ‘news’, where each student shares something interesting from their week
- uploading recipes that they have cooked at home
- making and sharing photos of pets, families or different parts of the home
- reviews of books read, or films/ shows they have watched



Online discussion

Chat boards and discussion forums are perhaps the most vital tools for facilitating learner-to-learner interaction, however you will need to instruct students on how to model active listening and positive communication in an online environment.

A protocol or list of norms for communication can be set prior to engaging in online discussion. This might include such guidelines as:

- Head posts with a clear title so that other learners can navigate the discussion easily.
- Feel free to disagree with others, but always respond with courtesy and respect. Don't be afraid to change your mind or opinion. Just because you post something doesn't mean you have to defend it at all costs.
- Add value to discussions by responding with questions or original observations.
- Wait before responding to a message, particularly if it sparks a strong reaction in you. Take the time to respond calmly and rationally.

These guidelines translate to not just a supportive online community, but also to vital skills in digital communication.

Group work and collaborative activity

Embed discussion, peer feedback and group work into the distance teaching unit so that learners are required to work together. For example, a research task might work as follows:

1. Split students into groups (post the groupings online) and assign each group a different aspect of a research topic.
2. Students coordinate web-based research in their groups (you can assign different roles if you wish, such as group leader and writer/secretary) and prepare a resource with their findings.
3. Each group uploads their resource to a shared space on the learning platform.
4. Individual students must then post a comment on at least one other group's resource. This might be:
 - a. *Something I find interesting (and why)*
 - b. *A connection I can make to another aspect of the topic*
 - c. *A question I have or something I don't understand.*
5. The teacher then collates all resources into a single document which can be used to inform the next phase of the learning.

While coordinating an online collaborative activity of this nature takes a good deal of teacher management, the resulting sense of community and interactivity far outweighs the challenges.

Learner–Interface Interaction:

Creating an Effective Online Learning Environment

The final interaction you need to consider is the one between your students and the online learning system you choose to employ. If students cannot navigate the system efficiently, or are forced to contend with regular technical issues, their learning will suffer. In order to be effective, student engagement with the system must be positive.

Prior to making any decisions, it is imperative that you assess your students' access to technology at home. If certain students do not have reliable internet or device access, you may need to discuss alternatives with parents (eg, a relative's home or public library). Failing that, hard copies may be required.

Choosing an online platform

LMS:

School learning management systems such as moodle or blackboard, which allow student/teacher (and often parent) communication, resource uploading and discussion.

Edtech software:

Products that offer online learning activities designed for student engagement, automated reporting, work assessment and data tracking.

Social media:

An effective means of communicating with both parents and students. However be aware of any regulations or policies surrounding teacher/student contact on non-school platforms.

Given that each type addresses different functions, the optimal solution is to integrate a mix of platforms. An LMS can be used to connect the whole class with discussions, resources and notices, while individual student practice and activities can be assigned through an EdTech product which is easy to use from home. Email and phone can be used to contact parents or individual students.

General communications:

Such as email, newsletter or telephone. Given that each type addresses different functions, the optimal solution is to integrate a mix of platforms. An LMS can be used to connect the whole class with discussions, resources and notices, while individual student practice and activities can be assigned through an EdTech product which is easy to use from home. Email and phone can be used to contact parents or individual students.

Onboarding students

Where possible, train your students in effective use of the learning platform before they leave school. This will give you the opportunity to trial the software and foresee possible issues. You can also arrange for your school's IT department to provide a basic troubleshooting workshop for common technical difficulties.

If this is not possible, you can post a video tutorial online.

In any case, providing actual screen captures is preferable to text-only instructions.

If you are teaching students in the younger years, give parents a basic overview of the learning system so that they can assist if their child has difficulty with it at home.

Putting systems in place for monitoring and management

Whatever platform you choose, you need to ensure that it has the capacity for:

- students to submit work digitally
- student data to be recorded
- student activity to be logged.

The latter is critical. It's ideal if you can see what students have been doing; who has looked at a particular resource, who has completed set activities and so on. This enables you to keep students accountable and alerts you to those who might need intervention.

The best systems for digital learning will automate this procedure so that it's easy to stay on top of your students' online activity.

Creating a resource library

In order to avoid entrusting your students with weeks' worth of material in hard copy, upload everything that they will need in advance.

This should include:

- the teaching sequence, clearly outlined
- the syllabus (even if students never open it, it's good for parents)
- handouts and instructional materials
- extension material
- practice material

Any worksheets you upload should be completed digitally, in order to avoid the unnecessary difficulties of scanning and uploading. Alternatively, you can outsource this to EdTech products that provide practice activities with automated marking.



Create an online help desk

Students need to know how and when to contact you if they need help, be it technical or content based.

You can try:

Email:

This is an easy option that doesn't take much set-up, although you might end up answering the same questions more than once.

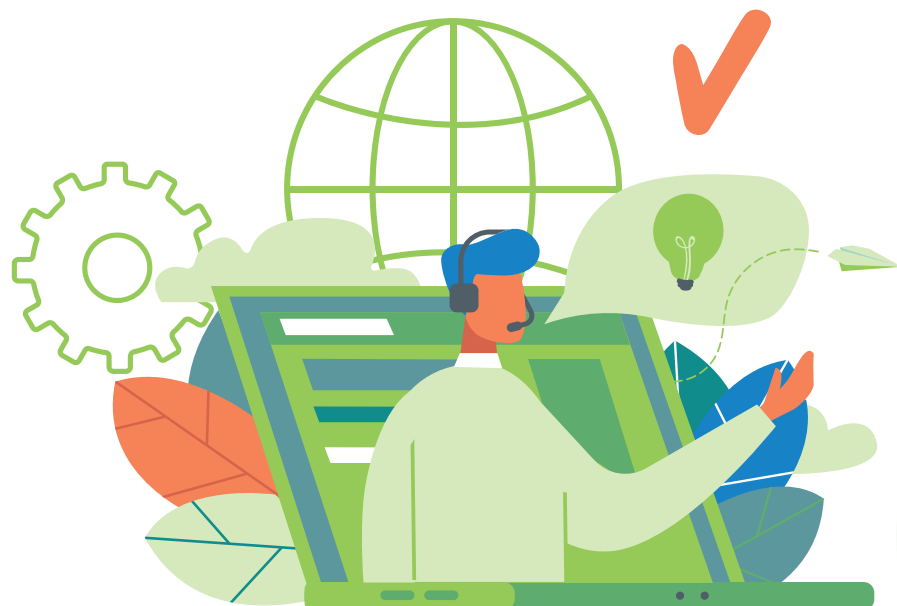
Discussion board:

This could operate like an online tech-support forum, with the benefit of only having to answer each query once. Students might be hesitant to ask questions about the class content in this shared space, but it works well for technical issues.

Chat:

Some LMSs have an inbuilt live chat function, which is perfect for real-time student/teacher interaction. Social media could be a substitute but, once again, refer to relevant policies surrounding student/teacher interaction on platforms not hosted by the school.

In any case, setting 'office hours' in which you are available for contact spares you from being inundated with student (and parent) queries. Set clear boundaries around your own time, as distance teaching can blur the distinction between school and home life if you aren't vigilant.



The Do's and Don'ts of Distance Teaching

Too much to take in?

Just keep these do's and don'ts in mind and you'll be set.

DO

- ✓ Maintain a visible and audible teacher presence
- ✓ Engage directly with individual students and your class as a whole
- ✓ Upload resources and ensure students know where to find them
- ✓ Provide timely and detailed feedback
- ✓ Follow up with students who go AWOL
- ✓ Keep parents informed of student progress
- ✓ Set clear virtual 'office hours' when you will be available for help and support
- ✓ Reward good online conduct
- ✓ Use a mix of different instructional strategies, including collaborative activity
- ✓ Encourage and participate in student discussion

DON'T

- ✗ Disappear
- ✗ Rely on worksheets
- ✗ Communicate via text alone
- ✗ Expect parents to do the job for you
- ✗ Use overly technical, complex instructional strategies
- ✗ Lose rapport and relationships
- ✗ Set and forget' assignments
- ✗ Relax expectations for student engagement



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