

Remote Learning Isn't Going Away – Yet. How to Help Teens Make the Most of Online Learning For the New School Year

BY JENNIFER WINWARD, Ph.D.



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If the thought of your child enduring another semester of remote learning has you despondent, you are not alone.

By most accounts, the abrupt shift to online-only learning in March was hectic and stressful, led by schools with no experience in virtual learning and parents stretched too thin to help. Teachers were forced to quickly replace thoughtfully developed curriculums with a haphazard mix of YouTube videos, emailed worksheets, Zoom meetings and online learning platforms. And at many schools, lots of students simply didn't show up online.

But now we've had a summer to recover from the shock of the COVID school closures and better prepare for the fall semester. Given the state has barred all public and private schools in Los Angeles County from holding in-person classes until the virus is better contained, we must focus our efforts on executing a far superior virtual learning experience.

I believe quality instruction is not reliant on the physical classroom, nor does learning at home mean we must lower our standards. That said, it's essential that educators as well as parents and teens understand how to make the most of remote learning. This means it's time to move the conversation from how to merely implement distance learning to how to make it a high-quality, engaging learning experience for all students.

As a 20-year veteran of teaching and tutoring, as well as the founder of an e-learning platform for middle and high school students, I have spent years analyzing how to create an effective digital learning

adolescent learning and brain development expert has garnered her recognition as a "Top 5 Female Entrepreneur" by the Women in IT Awards, "Top 40 Under 40" by the San Diego Business Journal, and as the "Most Influential Education Leader" by the San Diego Transcript. Dr. Winward earned her Ph.D. with a dual emphasis in Neuroscience and Developmental Neuropsychology from the University of California, San Diego.

environment for students of various learning styles. High-quality virtual instruction shares these important characteristics:

• Sequenced Lessons

The first thing I look for in an online learning experience is whether there is an order assigned to the material presented to students. While there can be great value in recorded lessons and educational videos, it's a red flag if students are supposed to simply navigate a bank of videos on their own without a clear progression. Just like in-person teaching, virtual lessons should be laid out sequentially, gradually increasing in difficulty, building skillsets, and laying the foundation for more complex material.

Additionally, virtual lessons should allocate time for students to practice new material independently as well as receive frequent feedback on correct and incorrect answers.

• Active Learning

The greatest risk in the shift to online learning is students will passively watch lessons, going through the motions without building knowledge. Taking notes, highlighting text, and writing questions in the margins are all signs that a student is paying attention and engaging with the material. Teachers can still encourage these hallmarks of active learning by providing printed worksheets or emailing documents for students to print at home. They can also offer guidance on taking notes - an important skill for college and career! - or have students turn in their notes for review and feedback.

Parents can help kids get a head start by

setting up a good home learning environment before the school year starts. Ideally, this would entail a desk or table with clean space to work (no clutter!) in a quiet room with lots of great light. Once school resumes, it's important that students actually sit at this desk (and not attempt to do class from bed), put phones and other distractions away, and be prepared to take notes.

Finally, I suggest that students always keep their camera turned on during class - this allows teachers to see that they are engaged. Plus, there's nothing like knowing you're being watched to keep you on your best behavior!

• A Growth Mindset

In any quality learning experience, students should be encouraged to learn from their mistakes. This could mean students are asked to re-do questions they got wrong, write every single step to a math equation, or revise an English paper several times to ensure every spelling and grammar mistake is fixed. Another effective technique is having students explain a concept in their own words or teach it to a sibling. This process pushes students to review material until they feel confident that they understand it well enough to explain to others.

I feel so strongly about the importance of people learning from their own mistakes that I made a "Mistake Bank" a central component of my e-learning platform Winward Academy so that students could easily go back and redo prior missed questions at any time. Students can create their own "Mistake Banks" by tracking missed questions and setting aside at least one hour every week just to look back at their prior errors and make sure they understand the concepts.

• Student Engagement

Building a rapport with a new teacher when class takes place online will be a challenge. To start off on the right foot, students should make a big effort to demonstrate that they are alert, take their academics seriously, review new material thoroughly, and are eager to contribute to class discussions. As discussed in the Live@BHUSD reopening plan, teachers are going to provide clear expectations around grading and attendance. Students should be aware of these expectations and seek to meet or exceed them.

For high school students, it's worth remembering these teachers might very well be the ones they ask for letters of recommendation when it's time to apply to college. Teachers will remember fondly those students who were still punctual to class, participated actively, and stayed on top of their course work during the days of remote learning.

• Teacher-Student Connections

Creating opportunities for teachers to connect with students is critical in the virtual format. Recorded lessons can be paired

with discussion groups moderated by a teacher to give students an opportunity to ask questions. Tools like Google Docs allow students to share their ideas with teachers in real-time. Teachers can offer regular "Office Hours" using video conferencing technology like Zoom or Google Meet. This gives students a consistent means to connect face-to-face with their teacher to ask questions, seek help and get timely feedback.

If students are struggling with a topic, I always encourage them to first put together a list of their questions and then email their teacher asking for help with that itemized list. Teachers will be more excited to give extra time to support students who've shown that they've put time and thought into what support they need. Plus, it'll make the tutoring session much more efficient if students have their questions ready to go. An email that just says, "I need help!" isn't going to get the same response as an email that explicitly details the areas of need.

• Structure and Support

In an ideal world, students would engage their minds for the same amount of time at home as they did when they were at school, roughly 6-7 hours per day. The Live@BHUSD plan seeks to honor this approach by holding classes on the same schedule as what students would do in person. The instruction time should include a mix of computer-based learning, pen and paper study, and reading. Teachers can help structure and pace learning by dividing assignments into smaller deliverables, such as assigning students to submit an outline with a thesis before a final essay. This type of check-in helps students stay on task and allows teachers to gauge if students need additional support to develop their ideas.

If a teacher doesn't break up assignments, then students should be prepared to break them up for themselves. It's a great skill to learn for college and for life, where oftentimes you're presented with a huge project to complete and need to break it down into manageable chunks to get through it. For students, this means if an essay is due in three weeks, not waiting two-and-a-half weeks to write it. Instead, students should map out their time across those three weeks, allocating time toward completing research, developing an outline, writing a thesis, developing body paragraphs, writing the intro and conclusion, and then proofreading.

This process is invariably a tough sell with teenagers. But it's worth encouraging students to try to see the long-term value of what's being asked in an academic setting.

We have a short breather before the new school year starts to rethink our collective approach to digital learning. Let's set our sights high, recognizing that while distance learning has its many challenges, learning doesn't stop when we exit the classroom. ●