

80

pathways

to successful distance teaching and learning

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The goal

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students may have to learn remotely for some time to come. The purpose of this information sheet is to provide educators who have little or no experience in distance learning with a set of useful strategies to get them on the right track. We have collected 80 of the best research-backed ideas and organized them into categories. You can choose the ones that are the most helpful for your transition from in-class to online teaching. **Our main aim is to support educators as they move to distance learning, provide some guidance, and help them pick up new skills.** There are a multitude of available tools, so we have suggested certain ones that we feel are effective and relatively simple to use. You may feel that 80 pathways are a lot! Yes, no doubt, but we wanted to supply you with a reliable map so you can set out on your distance learning journey with confidence.

What is distance teaching?

Distance teaching and learning refers to education for students who are not present in a classroom. The teaching is done remotely, or online, instead of face-to-face. This involves different kinds of student motivations and interactions, where the word “isolation” takes on a whole new meaning. To teach at a distance, you must overcome different kinds of distance: spatial, technological, temporal, cultural, social, emotional, and, above all, pedagogical—the most challenging kind of distance. This can be achieved by considering the critical parameters, or the teaching conditions. And that is the objective of this information sheet. The ultimate goal is to give students a positive learning experience so that they can build their knowledge and skills and continue to learn.

Is distance teaching more effective than face-to-face teaching, or less?

According to Couturier (Agence Science-Press, July 2020), despite dozens of studies, meta-analyses, and reviews of meta-analyses, the effectiveness of distance teaching and learning remains an open question. We just don't have the answer yet. Twenty years after the first large-scale investigations into the issue, the same question keeps coming up. Is it simply a case of asking the wrong question? Perhaps we can settle on the conclusion that good teaching is possible under both face-to-face and remote conditions. The key to effective distance teaching would therefore be to find and apply effective strategies that promote learning, regardless of the conditions.

A. Technology and connectivity tools

1. **Do your students have Internet access?** In distance learning, the first thing to establish is whether your students have access to the Internet. Then, you need to know more details. For example, some students may have only limited Internet access. They may need to borrow their parent's phone to go online. This is a far cry from unlimited high-speed broadband service. For many university students, smart phone is their only means of accessing the Internet. So, if any of your students are lacking good-quality Internet access, you (and your school) must find a way to supply it. In some countries, all schools, even those that are closed during the pandemic, offer free Internet services to families residing in the vicinity. And this is just one of many solutions.
2. **What technology tools do your students have?** Besides an Internet connection, you should know what tools your students have access to. Do these tools really enable distance learning? For example, students do not necessarily have exclusive use of the home computer. It may be shared by several siblings, not to mention parents working from home.
3. **What about your students' technology profiles?** Distance learning is so much easier when you take the time to find out the technology profiles of your students. You can then choose the most suitable platforms and apps.

B. Initiate distance learning in the classroom, especially with younger students

4. **You can practice distance learning in class.** In a perfect world, you would teach your students the basics of distance learning while they are still in your classroom. This would give them confidence and avoid a lot of problems later when they have to do it for real.
5. **Teach your students the main routines for both classroom and distance learning.** Students, especially younger ones, will find it reassuring to practice the main distance learning routines in class. Begin by doing the lessons together in class (French, English, math, science, and even physical education and health) in the same way as for distance learning. Help them connect to the system, access the materials you have prepared, upload their work, work in teams, and so on.

C. Contact your students rapidly and regularly

6. **Contact your students rapidly.** Remote learning may make some students anxious. These students, regardless of age, will need rapid feedback and reassurance. Make the first contact with your students as early as possible. This lets them know that you are there for them, so they can start off on the right foot.
7. **Plan your meetings.** Plan your individual and group meetings thoughtfully.
8. **Select user-friendly apps for communicating.** There are many apps you can use to stay in touch with your students. Some schools have portals. A Facebook group works well with more mature students. Apps such as Remind ([remind.com](https://www.remind.com)) can be useful, particularly for secondary and post-secondary students. These allow you to create class groups for safe and regular sharing, and messages can be programmed in advance.
9. **Contact all your students regularly.** One of the major challenges in remote learning is the lack of contact. Keep in regular touch with your students by every means at your disposal. Remote learning doesn't mean that you are "remote" from your students. In fact, it's just the opposite. You can stay in regular contact, even if it's virtual, and your students will need it more than ever.
10. **Don't forget the phone.** Sometimes you have to pick up the phone, especially at the beginning. While this might seem time-consuming, it is also necessary. Especially for elementary school students, as you need to make sure they are actually present (at home). You can also talk with their parents, get to know them, explain how the system works, and set minds at ease.

D. Keep it simple

11. **Simpler is better.** You can make distance learning easier for your students by keeping it simple. It's hard enough to make the transition from the physical classroom to a virtual school. Don't get too ambitious for the first few weeks. It's best to start with the essentials.
12. **Organize short real-time meetings.** Keep your real-time (synchronous) meetings brief, especially early on.
13. **Don't try to replicate what you did in class.** Learning at home is not the same as learning in class, so don't try to replicate your classroom teaching style. Sometimes, less is more. Try something different. Experiment!

E. Plan, plan, plan

14. **Plan for the short, medium, and long term.** The secret to successful distance learning is sound planning for the short, medium, and long term. Of course, your plans may change along the way. Plan your student meetings with care: this is key to effective distance learning.
15. **Don't overload your real-time meetings.** Limit what you cover in your real-time meetings with students. The most productive meetings might address only one idea at a time. This will also make things easier for your students.
16. **Share your schedule with your students.** Let your students know what to expect and when. This will lessen their anxiety.

F. Organize your lessons

17. **Organize your real-time lessons.** Organize regular real-time lessons with the whole class.
18. **Encourage small group discussions.** If your tools allow, get your students engaged in small-group discussions.
19. **Use teamwork.** Take advantage of tools that let your students work in virtual teams, such as Padlet, Parlay, or Google Classroom.
20. **Have your students join real-time meetings.** Get your students to participate in real-time activities and discussions.
21. **Present your meeting plan.** If possible, distribute your meeting plan in advance to provide guidelines and clarify expectations.
22. **Always give feedback on tasks and assignments.** Making sure that your students are engaged in their work is a huge challenge. In large group meetings, give them feedback on their work.
23. **Record your group meetings.** Provide recordings of your group meetings so that absentee students can catch up on what they missed.
24. **Greet your students.** Always greet your students when you contact them online. We tend to forget the simple social niceties such as saying "Hi." Make it a point to greet all your students each time you "meet." Ask them how they are. Make them feel acknowledged, welcome, and appreciated.
25. **Encourage interactivity through real-time online meetings.** Real-time online meetings are opportunities for interactivity, between you and your students and among your students. Distance teaching can be so much more than simply broadcasting online presentations to passive students.

G. Select good technology tools

26. **Select the best technology tools for your teaching goals.** Your technology tools should suit your teaching approach. Some good examples are provided in the information sheet: 9 Tools for Innovation and Distance Learning. (karsenti.ca/chaire/distance)
27. **Select tools that let you stay in touch with your students.** Staying in touch with your students is vital. Does your school have a portal? Is email the best choice? Or a social networking site? Use whatever works best for you and your students. Your school may have some recommendations on this.
28. **Use free tools.** Even though your school may recommend (or require) certain tools, some of your students may not have access to them at home. Try to find equivalent tools that are free of cost.
29. **All your students need access to the tools.** Make sure that all your students can access all the tools you intend to use.
30. **All tools must be secure, and if possible, ad-free.** All the tools that you and your students use must be secure, and ideally, without advertising. You don't want your students to be bothered by advertisers, or worse. Take the time to show them how to configure their accounts properly.

H. Give your students regular support

31. **Maintain regular contact with your students.** To overcome the problems of distance learning, you need to keep in regular contact with your students.
32. **Be there for them.** Distance learners often feel alone. Be there for them as much as you can. They will appreciate it.
33. **Provide reassurance, guidance, and support.** Two major challenges in distance learning are overcoming the emotional distance and pedagogical distance (i.e., the "remoteness"). Your students still need your reassurance, guidance, and support.
34. **Students need individual support.** Whenever possible, you can suggest individual support sessions. All your students will benefit, especially those who are struggling with their work.
35. **Give your students regular feedback.** Frequent and regular feedback is beneficial for all students.
36. **Praise all your students regularly.** Don't forget to give all your students regular encouragement. Praise them for their accomplishments, their participation, or just their winning smile.
37. **Conduct individual and group follow-ups.** Keep a list of your students and the times that you contacted them (both individually and in groups). Note whether or not they handed in their work. This is not feedback, but instead a personal list that lets you track their progress.
38. **Take attendance.** Note who is present and absent at the virtual meetings. Keep abreast of who is and is not participating.
39. **Help your students organize their work.** Organization is essential for success. Part of an educator's job is to teach students how to organize their work.
40. **Promote feelings of competence.** Some students might feel less competent with distance learning. But they need to feel competent so they can engage in their schoolwork. Find ways to help them build feelings of competence.
41. **Pay particular attention to students with learning problems.** Distance learning can exacerbate the challenges for students with learning problems. Don't hesitate to give them extra help (see, e.g., [d'Alloprof pour les parents](#) for some good ideas).
42. **Always be caring and considerate.** Your attitude counts as much online as it does in the classroom. Let your students know that you support them.
43. **Whether near or far, you're still a person.** The research shows that the personal qualities of teachers play a key role in their students' academic success. Even on a computer screen, you're still a human being.
44. **Bond with your students.** Overcoming isolation is an enormous challenge in remote learning. Students may feel that they are all alone. Find ways to establish ties with your students, especially new students.
45. **Never underestimate your impact on your students.** The fact that you are there for your students, if only virtually, should not be taken lightly. The research provides clear evidence that teachers can make all the difference in their students' learning.

I. Set routines and rules

46. **Schedule meetings.** Establish a regular schedule for daily and weekly meetings.
47. **Help your students develop a routine.** This is a must for successful distance learning. Give your students regular reminders so they stick to the routine.
48. **Be flexible.** Especially for the first few weeks, let go of rigid expectations.
49. **Hold your individual and group meetings in a calm setting.** Select a calm setting to hold your individual and collective meetings, and suggest that your students do the same. They need to find a quiet place so they can participate fully.
50. **Spell out the classroom rules.** Distance learning requires new rules and regulations. You will probably have to spell these out. This will make the process smoother for everyone.
51. **Explain how to speak up online.** Explain the right way to speak up during online meetings. Some tools, like Zoom, allow students to raise their hands just like in a classroom. Show your students how to use all the functions, and set the rules for participating in virtual meetings: who can talk, when, virtual hand raising, and so on.

J. Use videos

52. **Take advantage of videos.** Videos can be an excellent way to teach online, especially when produced by educators. Students generally find videos exciting. You can assign videos to watch in connection with their schoolwork. For example, they can do a task before, during, or after the video.
53. **Use tools to create complete lessons based on online videos.** Don't hesitate to use the many video tools available online. They make it easy to develop complete lessons based on a video. For example, use Edpuzzle (edpuzzle.com) to edit a YouTube video. You can give it your own title, add questions (and track your students' responses), and add your own voiceover. Lesson planning made easy!
54. **Prepare videoclips for your students.** You can make videoclips where you give a short lesson, or just talk. There are many apps available for this (see the 16 best apps at: karsenti.ca/16videos.pdf).
55. **Keep your videoclips short.** Remember, keep it short and sweet to capture your students' interest.

K. Make your assignments specific and interesting

56. **Assign schoolwork between meetings.** Give your students specific tasks and activities to complete between meetings.
57. **Emphasize reading.** Assign your students some reading for 15 to 30 minutes a day in addition to their regular homework. This will improve their language skills. There is abundant research evidence that reading is beneficial for all students.
58. **Give longer homework assignments.** Occasionally, you can give longer homework assignments. Students who are learning from home usually have more time on their hands.
59. **Make your lessons fun.** Introduce some fun to improve your students' motivation to learn. Find ways to make your lessons amusing and enjoyable.
60. **Get your students moving.** Just because they're learning online doesn't mean they have to sit still the entire time. Far from it. Remind your students to get up and move around, for the sake of their health. Why not exercise together?
61. **Try flipped classroom methods.** A lot of research has been devoted to the flipped classroom approach. This model reverses the individual and group learning spaces. You can improve your remote teaching practices by applying some flipped classroom techniques. For instance, you can re-organize your time slots to suit individual learners. They can do individualized activities and projects and participate in specific discussions. This will transform your student meetings into a more dynamic and interactive learning space.

L. Assess distance students and promote continued learning

62. **Think of assessment as an education strategy that promotes learning.** In the vast literature on the value of learning assessment, the jury is out. Our own view is that assessment is an education strategy that promotes learning.
63. **Use different types of assessment to determine whether your students understand the work, and rethink your teaching if necessary.** Your assessment methods should help you identify whether your students really understand what they're doing. If not, try other teaching methods.
64. **Your assessments should provide feedback.** Design your assessments to provide feedback. This helps students identify what they need to work on and how, so that they can improve.
65. **Use assessments that encourage student autonomy and responsibility.** Your assessments should encourage student autonomy and responsibility for learning. Autonomy is an important component of learning, as it helps students develop a sense of responsibility for constructing their own knowledge and skills.
66. **Use assessments to track students' schoolwork, assignments, and progress.** Find assessment methods that inform you about your students' performance. Use the results to guide your subsequent teaching and help your students through the next steps.
67. **Develop assessment methods based on clear learning objectives.** Your assessments should accurately reflect your learning objectives. Studies have demonstrated that this type of assessment is the most beneficial for both students and teachers.
68. **If possible, use differentiated assessment strategies for different types of students.** The research shows that assessments should be differentiated and adapted for the needs of diverse students.
69. **Use assessments to inform students, parents, and other stakeholders.** Your assessments can be used to inform not just your students, but also their parents (particularly for younger students) and other education stakeholders. Assessments can provide information about academic achievement, progress, and acquired skills. The results can be used to plan new teaching strategies and improve education systems.
70. **Collect a variety of data and information on your students' learning and skills.** Remote assessment poses another major challenge. But by gathering information from a variety of sources, you can make a more informed judgment about the knowledge and skills that your students have acquired.
71. **Use your assessment results to guide your teaching and foster continued learning.** Your assessments are a valuable source of information that can help you decide on ways to encourage your students to keep on learning.
72. **Think about strategies to obtain "evidence of learning."** One of the biggest challenges of distance assessment is deciding on how to obtain real evidence of learning. In other words, how can we be sure that it was actually the students who did the work, and not a friend or parent?

M. Collaborate in teams with inspirational colleagues

73. **Work together with colleagues who inspire you, and keep in touch.** Distance education doesn't have to be a solitary sentence. Keep in touch with your colleagues.
74. **Celebrate your accomplishments by sharing with other teachers on social networks.** For example, you can follow [@weareteachers](#).
75. **You can always invite other teachers to your virtual meetings.** Spice up your group meetings by inviting new and interesting people to join in, or bring in a guest speaker.
76. **Sign up for online education communities.** There are thousands of education communities out there that are happy to provide you with support and interesting teaching ideas.
77. **Share your lesson plans and accomplishments on social networks.** Teamwork is more than just copying your peers' good ideas. You can also inspire other teachers. Share your lesson plans, your accomplishments, and your students' work on social networking sites and other platforms.

N. Keep parents in the loop

78. **Remember to stay in touch with parents.** Make sure you have the parents' email and phone numbers. This is especially important for younger students, but you may also need to contact the parents of secondary students at times.
79. **Communicate with parents regularly.** Let the parents know what's going on. Inform them of your preferred contact method, and find out what method works best for them. Some teachers start a Facebook page, while others use a WhatsApp group. It depends on how many students you have and your availability. In any case, you need a strategy that works for both you and the parents.
80. **Parents need support too.** Parents, particularly those with younger children, often need reassurance. For example, you could advise them on how to set screen time limits.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author of this information sheet has taught for many years in the field of distance learning. He has designed several training programs, including the first Ph.D. Distance Learning program in education. He has also developed a number of MOOCs. He designed a platform for teacher training in distance learning in Africa based on the cell phone and artificial intelligence. He has also conducted many studies on distance learning in diverse settings, including Canada, Europe, and France.