

8 Research-based best practices for teaching remote learners



Table of contents

Introduction

page 03 ›

CHAPTER 1

Why research-based remote learning best practices matter

page 04 ›

CHAPTER 2

Research-based remote learning best practices

page 06 ›

Conclusion

page 12 ›

Introduction

Many university and college instructors never taught remotely before the spring of 2020. A global health crisis shuttered higher education institutions, leaving students and instructors with no choice but virtual learning. Many schools have chosen virtual learning this academic year, meaning that instructors had to prepare themselves to teach remote learners.

This set of research-based best practices helps educators deliver effective, engaging remote learning. After reading this ebook, educators will gain clear understanding of how to implement these remote learning best practices in their virtual classrooms.



Why research-based best practices for teaching remote learners matter

There has never been a more important time to talk about best practices for teaching remote learners. The goal of these best practices is to reduce the confusion and uncertainty regarding remote learning now and going forward.

Here are three reasons why educators and institutions should implement evidence-based remote learning best practices as soon as possible:

1. They help instructors teach more effectively.
2. They help students learn more efficiently.
3. Distance learning could be the future of higher education.

Helping instructors teach more effectively

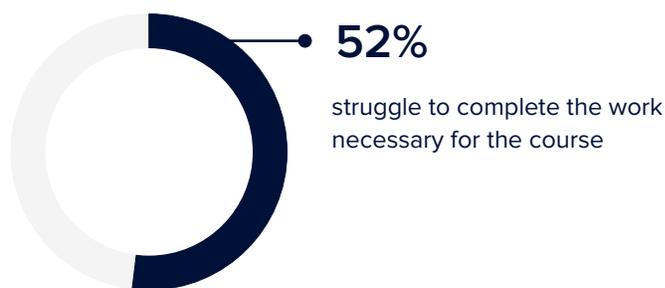
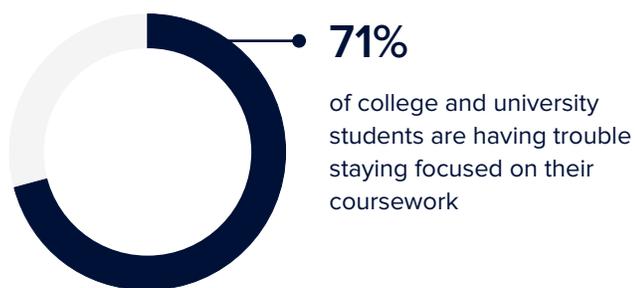
Remote learning best practices are grounded in proven techniques that can improve instructors' effectiveness. Before the spring of 2020, many instructors had never taught online – in fact, only 28% of instructors believed their institutions had created an ideal digital learning environment for students.

By implementing proven remote learning best practices, instructors can feel more confident in their teaching skills. Moreover, they're better prepared to create positive experiences for students.

Helping students learn more efficiently

The shift to remote learning has been challenging for students. A February 2021 study revealed that 71% of college and university students are having trouble staying focused on their coursework. The same study reported that 52% struggle to complete the work necessary for the course, while 40% found it a challenge to attend online classes.

Implementing research-based remote learning best practices gives instructors the tools they need to deliver engaging courses and support students, so they do not struggle with online learning.



Embodying the future of higher education

For centuries, the instructional model at universities and colleges was in-person. Technology didn't support any other models until the end of the 20th century. It would seem unthinkable that model could change; yet the events of 2020 have proven that even the most stable institutions aren't immune to disruption.

As administrators at academic institutions plan for the future, there's an excellent chance that remote learning will figure heavily into their strategies. With that in mind, colleges and universities must prepare for disruption by learning how best to deliver remote learning.

Research-based remote learning best practices

The following eight research-based remote learning best practices help ensure that virtual learning is effective and engaging for instructors and students:

1. Organize your coursework materials for ease of access and clarity
2. Communicate clearly and frequently
3. Use scaffold learning techniques
4. Encourage student participation in the virtual classroom
5. Assess students' learning through mini-quizzes
6. Build connections with students
7. Ask for feedback frequently
8. Ensure students have access to the resources they need for academic success

1. Organize your coursework materials for ease of access and clarity

A [2015 study](#) demonstrated the link between higher levels of clarity in instruction and how students absorb material. In the context of remote learning, it's easy for communication to break down; researchers advocate for virtual classrooms to be navigable and easy to understand.

Other research bears this out: a [2019 study](#) revealed students value online courses that are highly organized. What does this mean? Students want a dedicated learning hub to find course materials and assignments as well as any communications from the instructor. They don't want that information to be in several places.

How to put this remote learning tip into practice

To put this remote learning tip into action, you need the right technological foundation in place. The remote learning platform you use should integrate with learning management systems such as Canvas. This integration makes it easy for you to upload course materials to a single hub, and it's simple for your students to find them. Your students won't feel confused and frustrated, and it will be easier for you to organize your course.

2. Communicate clearly and frequently

A study from [National-Louis University](#) in Chicago shows that during remote learning, students evaluate all the interactions they have with their instructors (emails, announcements, assignments, course organization, etc.), including the actual course delivery.

A [2020 article in the Journal of Education Technology](#) recommends that instructors communicate clearly and frequently with their students. Such communication keeps them engaged and also clears up any potential misunderstandings.

How to put this remote learning tip into practice

Again, the right technological foundation plays a significant role in putting this remote learning tip into practice.

A remote learning platform with a variety of communication channels (chat, phone, video, and email) allows instructors to share information quickly and easily with their students. Because the platform integrates with learning management systems, all the communication can appear there, too.

3. Use scaffold learning techniques

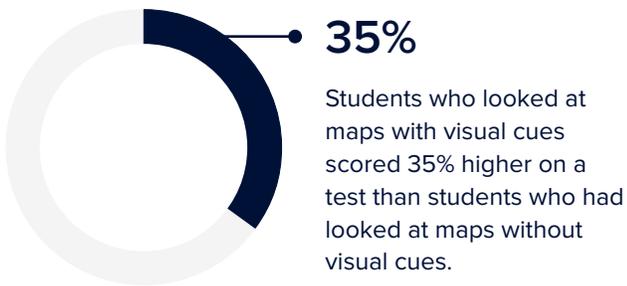
When you're in a physical classroom, a gesture draws your students' attention to the whiteboard or any images you've displayed on a screen. A virtual classroom makes pointing things out a bit more complicated. Yet, it's not impossible.

A 2020 study noted that using visual scaffolding such as arrows or labels direct students' attention to important sections of online presentations. For example, if you were teaching a geology class and you wanted to point out the differences between igneous, sedimentary, and metamorphic rocks, you would display pictures of those rocks on a slide and label them. The study pointed out that students who looked at maps with visual cues scored 35% higher on a test than students who had looked at maps without visual cues.

How to put this remote learning tip into practice

When presenting slides through your remote learning platform, annotate them so students can clearly identify crucial facts.

Even if you utilize asynchronous learning techniques (meaning that you prepare slides and post them for students to look when it's convenient for them), scaffold learning techniques go a long way toward ensuring students will absorb the material.



4. Encourage student participation in the virtual classroom

Student participation and engagement comes naturally in a physical classroom – an instructor can see students raising their hands and call on them. The concept of student participation is still vital to virtual classrooms, as research has shown.

A [2020 study](#) published by researchers at the University of Alabama defined “student engagement” as active participation in the learning environment and going above and beyond on assignments to learn. The students researchers surveyed didn’t differentiate the way students engage in remote learning vis-à-vis in-class learning, meaning that student engagement still matters during virtual learning.

How to put this remote learning tip into practice

While instructors can’t call on students the same way they would in a physical classroom, they can still encourage engagement in the class through live chat. One of the benefits of remote learning is that instructors can post interactive polls and links to digital material that spur discussion during synchronous teaching.

What if you’re teaching asynchronously? Instructors can still foster discussion by recording lectures and posting supplementary materials. Students can post their thoughts in an online forum hosted by the learning management software the instructor uses.



5. Assess students' learning through mini-quizzes

Even when teaching in-person, instructors aren't always sure that students are absorbing the material. Quizzes and tests serve as valuable tools to evaluate a student's knowledge. The same principle applies in remote learning.

A meta-analysis from researchers published in August 2020 shows that low-stakes mini-quizzes enhance students' retention of material. There are a number of online quiz tools that instructors can use to test their students' knowledge; since these quizzes are graded automatically, that saves work for the instructor.

How to put this remote learning tip into practice

When instructors present learning materials through a remote learning platform, they can easily insert a link to an online quiz.

Students demonstrate their knowledge; instructors receive their results without having to grade the quiz – it's a win-win situation.



6. Build connections with students

Research from a 2016 study highlights the need for instructors to build strong connections with their students during distance learning. The author of the study wrote that instructors must demonstrate “that the teacher is personally interested and invested in each student.”

Previous research bolsters these claims. Other studies show that when instructors forge healthy, supportive relationships with students, students are less likely to drop out of school.

How to put this remote learning tip into practice

This is another instance where a robust, feature-rich remote learning platform comes into play.

A remote learning platform enables instructors to connect with their students during and after class. They can contact students through chat, telephone, video conference, or email. Face-to-face contact reduces the isolation students feel. It also gives students a sense of familiarity during these confusing and uncertain times.

7. Ask for feedback frequently

On campus, students have the opportunity to evaluate instructors at the end of the course. The evaluation process is formal and structured. While students should have the same chance to provide feedback about their instructors at the end of a remote learning course, research shows it’s essential for instructors to ask students how it’s going during the online course.

A 2019 study demonstrated that the best online teachers had one thing in common: they frequently asked for student feedback on how they felt the course was going. This gives students the opportunity to share remote learning tips with their instructor so the instructor can improve the course.

How to put this remote learning tip into practice

A remote learning platform makes it simple to implement this remote learning tip in a virtual classroom.

Instructors can share a link to an online survey with their students through a presentation, or they could post the link to the learning management system. Through these methods, instructors receive feedback in a standardized format to improve their remote courses.

8. Ensure students have access to the resources they need for academic success

During a normal academic year, students might approach an instructor during office hours or after class to ask for help understanding the material. The instructor might provide some additional resources or suggest that the student utilize the academic resource center for tutoring.

On the face of it, remote learning would seem to present a challenging situation. However, a private California university opened a virtual academic resource center during the lockdown and saw a three-fold increase in students using the center.

How to put this remote learning tip into place

As an instructor, you might not be able to control whether the academic resource center at your school is open virtually. However, you can use your remote learning platform to provide supplementary resources for students.

In addition, you can use the remote learning platform to hold virtual office hours. Students can still get the help they need in a safe and convenient way.

Conclusion

Remote learning success is possible with research-based best practices. However, those best practices must be bolstered by a strong technological foundation.

The right remote learning platform offers features that will support your students, such as the ability to teach synchronously, integration with learning management systems, and multiple channels for communication including chat, telephone, email, and video conference.

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