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# 4 TIPS FOR

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## TEACHERS SHIFTING TO TEACHING ONLINE

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An educator with experience in distance learning shares what he's learned: Keep it simple, and build in as much contact as possible.

By [Kareem Farah](#)

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The coronavirus has caused widespread school closures for an unknown duration. Teachers are scrambling to find ways to support students from afar through distance and online learning. If you're feeling overwhelmed by this daunting task, you're certainly not alone.

I've also struggled to reach students outside of class. For several years, I taught in communities where students struggled to attend school consistently. To help absent students access my courses, I developed a [blended, self-paced, mastery-based instructional model](#) that empowered all my students to learn, whether they were in my room or not. Today, I run The Modern Classrooms Project, where I help other teachers do the same.

Through teaching students and training educators, I've learned a lot about how to effectively create and implement digital instruction and self-paced learning. I'll share a few tips below, and if you're looking for further support on developing effective distance learning beyond what I discuss in this piece, explore the [resources on our website](#) or start our free online course, [Building Modern Classrooms](#).

Here are some pointers that can help you create a sustainable and engaging distance learning experience for your students.

### 1. Simplicity Is Key

Every teacher knows what it's like to explain new instructions to their students. It usually starts with a whole group walk-through, followed by an endless stream of questions from students to clarify next steps. While this process can be frustrating at times, students can always rely on each other and the teacher in the room when they're stuck.

One of the challenges of distance learning is that you and your students are no longer in the same room to collectively tackle misconceptions. Instead, the large bulk of learning time is inevitably going to be driven by tasks that require a high level of self-direction.

As a result, simplicity is key. It is critical to design distance learning experiences that have very clear instructions and utilize only one or two resources. It's also best, when

possible, to [provide resources like readings as PDFs](#) that students can always access.

Keep in mind that simple structures can still require rigorous work: Tasks with few instructions often lead to the greatest amount of higher-order thinking, as students figure out what to do within defined parameters. Distance learning should push educators to think about how they can be leaner and more concise with their delivery of new information.

## 2. Establish a Digital Home Base

In the spirit of simplicity, it's vital to have a digital home base for your students. This can be a district-provided learning management system like Canvas or Google Classrooms, or it can be a self-created class website. I recommend Google Sites as a simple, easy-to-set-up platform.

You need a single digital platform that your students can always visit for the most recent and up-to-date information. It can be tempting to jump around between all the cool edtech applications out there—especially as so many of them are offering free services right now—but simplicity and familiarity are invaluable. Students need to feel comfortable going to the same place to access the same tools. The farther away you are from your students, the more important it is to cultivate stability and practice norms.

Additionally, if attendance was a challenge before, distance learning is going to magnify it. So students need a place to go when they fall out of the loop. Filling in gaps is only going to get harder when the teacher cannot quickly engage in individual or small group instruction. Your students are going to need to take control of their own learning. Your goal is to create a clear framework that allows them to do that. You might want to check out a [unit I created on probability and statistics](#) to see how I provided instructions and set up checkpoints for my students.



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## Establish a Digital Home

### 3. Prioritize Longer, Student-Driven Assignments

Efficiency is key when designing distance learning experiences. Planning is going to take more time and require a high level of attention to detail. You will not be able to correct mistakes on the fly or suddenly pivot when kids are

disengaged.

To effectively manage your time and sanity, you will want to prioritize longer, student-driven assignments and tasks that buy you time to keep planning future units—and that

get your students off the computer. Focus on building toward long-term projects where students have autonomy and a clear set of checkpoints and deadlines that need to be met. When possible, create opportunities for students to discuss what they're learning with their families and include an element of student choice to really build engagement.

Check out a project set up by Modern Classrooms' co-founder, Robert Barnett, that integrates choice and family engagement: [Demographer Challenge](#).

#### 4. Individual Touchpoints Are Game-Changers

What your students will miss the most is the human connection that is cultivated in your classroom. The little interactions you have with them in the hallways, before and after class or during breaks in lessons, are irreplaceable. While it can be tempting to focus on content in your distance learning assignments and instructional videos, what matters more is creating structures for personalized touchpoints with your students.

You can create these touchpoints through any medium you like: emails, video messages, phone calls, messages through your learning management system, comments on shared documents, etc. Create a structure and stick to it. Your students will see your investment and know that you care about them.

It's important to bear in mind that cultivating an engaging distance learning experience is hard. It takes time and an incredible amount of patience. If you are new to the experience, you're probably going to feel like a first-year teacher again. That's OK! Tackle the challenges step by step, keep your students updated on your progress, and stay positive. You can do this!



#### Weblink

[https://www.edutopia.org/article/4-tips-supporting-learning-home?gclid=EAlaIQobChMItrL1i6e-6gIVWQilCR1GPAqHEAAYASAAEgJjPPD\\_BwE](https://www.edutopia.org/article/4-tips-supporting-learning-home?gclid=EAlaIQobChMItrL1i6e-6gIVWQilCR1GPAqHEAAYASAAEgJjPPD_BwE)