Delivering Effective Digital Instruction

VirtualSC

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Introduction

VirtualSC's mission is to provide South Carolina students with flexible and rigorous online learning opportunities that will help them acquire the knowledge, skills, and characteristics necessary for college and career readiness.

Students in virtual classrooms have many of the same needs as students in face-to-face settings. Students need meaningful instruction, clear objectives, and frequent communication.

The resources included in this guide can assist teachers in providing eLearning support to students across our state.

Getting Started with Online Instruction

Shifting to online learning can seem daunting at first, but with careful planning and a laser sharp focus on what students should know and be able to do, teachers can make the shift with ease. One important thing to keep in mind is not to put too much pressure on yourself to make things perfect, or to become a digital learning guru. It takes time to master the art of designing and delivering digital instruction. When getting started, your focus should be on making as seamless a shift as possible, and on trying to establish as much of a sense of normalcy for you and your students as possible.

- Play up your strengths and don't try to incorporate too many things at once. Use what you have and make it work.

- Set a schedule for grading, reviewing messages, hosting class, collaborating with other teachers, and planning, etc.

- Establish set office hours for students and guardians to receive real-time assistance.

- Establish a separate telephone number as your office number so students can call or text you for answers to questions, or for assistance with technical difficulties.

Planning Instruction

Do not underestimate the importance of planning for online learning. It is important to begin with the end in mind. Determine what should be assessed and what digital activities will help students get to the intended learning destination. To ease the burden of developing effective online lessons, adopt the old adage that "two heads are better than one" and recruit colleagues to help make planning more manageable.

- Be mindful of how long it may take students to complete tasks. Keep in mind that you will likely have students who must share their computer with siblings at home, and/or multiple students in a household with limited broadband capacity.

- Chunk your sessions. Students will be most attentive during direct instruction of no more than twenty minutes.

- Build in student choice. Assume you may have students who cannot access certain software and tools, so be mindful of what you ask your students to do.

- Work with colleagues to share resources and ideas to cut down on time and frustration.

- Make sure the materials you use and the lessons you create are accessible to all learners, especially those with visual and hearing impairments. Reach out to your special services contact person or special education teachers for assistance and guidance.

Delivering Asynchronous Instruction

Asynchronous instruction gives students an opportunity to individually work on content. In situations where asynchronous instruction is the only option, the primary concern may simply be delivering instructional materials, directions, and activities in an online format. You should incorporate a variety of instructional resources that play to the strengths of their students (videos, written text, games, etc.).

- Use similar lesson planning structures, in an online platform, to those you would use in your physical classroom (hooks, guided practice, independent practice, etc.).

- Differentiate your teaching materials and incorporate a variety of activities such as readings, videos, images, and audio recordings.

- Teacher-created video lessons can be sent via email or posted to a website where students can watch them at their convenience. The videos can also serve as a re-teaching tool for struggling students.

- It is good practice to provide video overviews and tutorials summarizing past instruction. Videos can be used as a lesson preview or lesson review.

- Utilize the record feature to narrate or discuss content in slide shows. Include speaker notes as an added layer of support for students.

Delivering Synchronous Instruction

Synchronous instruction gives students the opportunity to connect with their teachers and classmates in a live setting. There are a variety of strategies teachers should use to ensure a positive experience for students who attend your live sessions.

- When planning your live sessions, build in extra time for troubleshooting technical difficulties, getting students settled, and answering questions.

- Always test your equipment (webcam, microphone, etc.) prior to the beginning of a session.

- Establish norms and expectations with students at the beginning of a session.

- Utilize your online platforms to provide one-on-one instruction such as Skype, Google Hangouts, etc.

- Record your sessions so that students who are unable to attend may view them at a later time. E-mail the recording link or post it to the teacher website.

- Monitor the chat box for questions and off-task behavior.

- The tone of your delivery matters, especially in an live setting. Try to communicate content in an enthusiastic manner.

- Don't be afraid to make mistakes during a session. Students will become comfortable making their own when they see how you handle and overcome yours.

Building and Maintaining Relationships

An online environment requires the same level of commitment to building relationships with students as does a face-to-face one. To maintain connections with students, teachers in digital environments should utilize practices similar to those they utilize in the physical classroom — just in a few novel ways.

- Check in with students daily via web conference, email, and/or telephone

- Use humor and share stories.

- Be transparent with the students and let them know that this is as much of a learning experience for you as it is for them.

- Use students' names during your live sessions, in written communication, and in assignment feedback.

- Utilize video conferencing tools for face-to-face meetings or pick up the telephone to call students - especially when they need assistance, when you need to explain complex concepts, or when you sense a disconnect.

- Contact parents and guardians regularly to ensure they know what is expected of students and to assuage any concerns they have.

- Remind students and guardians that this is a different mode of teaching for everyone. Allow them grace and ask for grace in return.

- Follow up on all communication as soon as possible to keep the lines open.

- Keep a record of all communication you have with students and parents. A log will be a useful reference in case issues and questions arise.

Making Collaboration Possible

As students work to master content and skills, collaboration is important in a digital environment. Once you have a solid understanding of how to move resources and content online, you can begin to venture into the slightly more daring territory of arranging for online student collaboration.

- Consider providing opportunities for virtual class discussions. Add a discussion topic to a forum in your learning management system and require students to comment on one another's posts.

- Encourage synchronous class discussions when possible. Schedule a time for the live discussion, send students advance notice of the session logistics, and encourage active participation from all attendees.

- Establish and communicate norms for online collaboration and conversations before you begin. Post the rules as a reminder before all synchronous and asynchronous discussions.

- If you can break your students into groups for sessions, consider doing so to encourage collaboration.

Grading and Feedback

In an online setting, when you are unable to be with the students as they are working, it is important to offer ongoing feedback on assignments and to strongly encourage them to review and use it. Establishing a culture of checking for, and using, feedback will help to reduce recurring mistakes and misunderstandings that could use up valuable time.

Instructing Students with Accommodations

Student accommodations must also be met in an online environment. For some students, this may be their first online learning experience, so they will need additional support.

- Review accommodations documents (IEP, 504, ELL).

- Provide student accommodations as outlined. If there are questions about how an accommodation can best be made in an online environment, reach out to your special services contact person for assistance.

- Monitor student progress closely.

- Check in and communicate with students, parents, and special education teachers regularly.