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## Best Practices in Middle Level Quaranteaching: Strategies, Tips and Resources Amidst COVID-19

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## **Best Practices in “Quaranteaching”: Strategies, Tips and Resources Amid COVID-19**

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### **Abstract**

School closings resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have forced teachers across the world to scramble to shift their face-to-face classes online. This rapid transition to what we call “quaranteaching” has left teachers little time to prepare for virtual teaching and learning. Acknowledging this challenge, in this article we share steps, strategies, tips, and resources to support and empower middle grades educators to successfully continue the online instruction (more accurately called “crisis teaching”) they have begun. We offer approaches to implementing collaboration, differentiation, and personalized learning, as well as approaches for authentically assessing student learning in a virtual learning environment. Issues such as access and equity are discussed, and unit ideas are shared. The skills and tools middle level educators are sharpening will likely also be used in subsequent years even when a health crisis is not in effect. An organized chart with multiple curated technology tools for young adolescents is also included.

*Keywords:* COVID-19, online teaching, virtual learning, online strategies

This past March, COVID-19 blazed into a global pandemic, causing schools across the nation to close their doors. Teachers scrambled to move their face-to-face classes online; this

abrupt change challenged even technologically savvy middle level teachers. Confined in large part to their homes, equipped only with a computer and the internet, they have been “quaranteaching” ever since. During this difficult time, we know that educators across the nation need support, so while we do not want to downplay the intricate nature of online teaching, we aim to provide strategies, tips, and resources that we hope will empower confidence in middle level teachers so that they may be encouraged to refine their lessons in this very necessary time of virtual teaching and learning. As middle school educators, we know the importance that the curriculum remains challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant (NMSA, 2010) no matter the platform or situation. We begin with steps for getting your virtual class up and running, then move into best practice approaches, and conclude with challenges and opportunities for online learning.

### **Steps for Implementing Online Instruction**

Just as there is no single way to set up your face-to-face classroom, the same holds true when designing your virtual learning environment. Many best practice approaches used in traditional classroom settings also can be effectively applied in the virtual environment; yet, how they are applied to online teaching and learning differs (Goodyear et al., 2001). So, if as a teacher you are just beginning or perhaps deciding to reset, you need not discard all of the effective practices you currently use in your face-to-face classes. Pace and Pettit (2020) suggest using the acronym “FLIP” (first established by the Flipped Learning Network, 2014) to encourage educators to start with a Flexible environment, create the Learning culture, Integrate Intentional learning, and harness your Professional educator self. We want to expand on these suggestions assuming the basic structures of online instruction, such as a learning platform and internet, are in place.

## **Organizing Your Online Classroom**

One of the best ways we have found for structuring online teaching and learning is to organize the content into specific modules. We suggest using your pacing guide as a starting point to develop modules that correlate with each unit's various concepts, topics, or skills. It is also a good idea to include standards, learning goals, and a brief description of what students can expect to learn. Then, plan your assessments and add the content, which includes all your teaching and learning activities and resources. At minimum, we suggest designating a distinct section or page on your learning platform for each of the following: class information and announcements, content, and assessments. We also highly recommend adding a separate "discussions" area to foster collaboration, which we discuss in the next section.

## **Creating a Positive Culture for Learning**

As teachers, we understand the importance of developing a positive learning environment to help produce optimal learning. One way to achieve this is to personalize the learning space and to make it aesthetically pleasing by adding color, student-friendly fonts, and images that speak to middle graders. This sets the tone and invites learners to log on. You might even consider adding an "About Me" page that includes interesting facts about yourself and adding personal pictures to give students a sense of your presence, which is extremely important since they most likely will not be able to see you in real time.

Because of its positive effect on learning outcomes, developing rapport with your middle graders also helps shape the virtual learning climate. Strong teacher-student rapport has shown positive effects on persistence and learning outcomes in distance learning contexts (Ratliff, 2018). In the traditional classroom setting, teachers often use verbal and non-verbal expressions and gestures to communicate messages. A teacher's smile or a nod of the head, for example,

signals approval and can be used to reinforce a student's comment or behavior. Yet, these non-verbal cues are often void in online learning environments (Betts, 2009), which means teachers must find alternate ways to use communication to build rapport. Darby (2020) suggests these tips:

1. Include announcements each week about upcoming topics and/or to review previous learning.
2. Answer students' questions and/or online postings in a timely manner.
3. Let students know when they can meet with you, either by establishing online office hours and/or scheduling an appointment.
4. Create and post videos that explain assignments.
5. Provide timely assessment and feedback.
6. Engage in online discussions.

Other strategies for building rapport include incorporating asynchronous discussion boards and dedicating a space where students can ask questions and receive replies from you and their peers. You might consider integrating a virtual graffiti board where students can write messages, poems, or song lyrics, for example. Because many middle graders tend to feel vulnerable during adolescence, having a space where they can express their ideas, thoughts, feelings, and creativity allows them to feel connected and gives them autonomy. It is important to set clear ground rules and consequences, though, for what can and cannot be posted and then remember to monitor the space. Drawing from middle graders' fondness for social media, you might try having them create a podcast or Voicethread about themselves, similar to your "All About Me" page, as a fun way to foster community and engagement. Ultimately, putting in place viable avenues for teachers and students to communicate with and among one another is

vital to the success of achieving a positive learning culture. And, as anyone who has ever taught middle school knows, developing strong rapport is essential for engaging students in learning, which we discuss next.

### **Engaging Middle Graders in Purposeful Learning**

When planning your instructional activities, it is important to strive for enthusiastic student engagement that matches learning goals. Choice boards and high-interest novel studies work well to encourage middle graders to participate in virtual learning. The key word here is “choice”, and when teachers make controlled choices available within instruction, everyone wins. Messer (2020) explains, “Young adolescents thrive when given opportunities to pursue their passions and take ownership of their learning. Significant academic and social growth happen in a middle school classroom where students have a voice about their learning” (p. 4). Novel studies are one way that teachers can incorporate interesting texts with real-world and interdisciplinary connections, an engagement model recommended especially for struggling middle grades readers (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). For example, [Fever, 1793](#) (Anderson, 2011) and [The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks](#) (Skloot, 2017) are fascinating stories that touch on epidemiology and medical research and ethics, hot topics with curricular connections as we live life in quarantine.

Adding an audiovisual component to your online class can also promote purposeful learning. Many sites now offer free live streaming so you can meet with your students in real time (see Curated Materials) and some online platforms now have built-in video capabilities where teachers can record lectures, demonstrations, and messages. You can also use your *iMovie* or *movie maker* and then upload the videos to your learning platform. Given middle level learners’ enthusiasm and aptitude for technology, having them record their own audios and

videos is a great way to engage them in student-centered learning. Or, perhaps you would like to take your students on a field trip, and now you can by tapping into various sites that offer free virtual field trips to places like the [National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.](#), the [National Women's History Museum](#), and the [Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History](#).

Online learning that is fun engages learners, but just because an activity is fun doesn't mean that it is purposeful for achieving the intended learning outcomes. Given the many available activities, games, and other information available on the World Wide Web, it's easy to get sidetracked. Regardless of which instructional resources use, it is always a good practice to make sure they support the skills and content of the learning standards and instructional goals.

### **Challenges and Opportunities with Online Learning**

#### **Accessibility to Technology**

Many students across the nation do not have access to computers and the internet, which means remote learning is not an option for them. To help combat this challenge, the [National Digital Inclusion Alliance](#) (NDIA), a digital equity advocacy group, recommends families seek assistance through [EveryoneOn](#), a non-profit organization that has partnered with a variety of internet providers to offer low-cost, affordable access to computers and the internet. The website "About" page states that as a non-profit entity, their "model includes collaborating with diverse national, state, and regional organizations as well as internet service and device providers to design and implement digital inclusion activities" (para. 1). AT&T, Comcast, and Mediacom are just a few companies currently offering services, some for as low as five dollars per month. And, initial access and installation fees are generally waived. To qualify, students must meet certain terms and conditions, such as receive free/reduced lunch through the National School Lunch Program, be enrolled in a Title I school, or qualify for another government assisted program.

Even if all of your students have access to technology and the internet, it is important to be mindful of COVID-19's impact on the very structure of families. It has disrupted the routines of daily life, with many parents now laid off or out of work. The pendulum has shifted to many families just trying to survive.

If students are equipped with the appropriate technology, online learning may open a window of possibility for students with limited access to books. More than 40% of teachers surveyed for the International Literacy Association's research report, "What's Hot In Literacy?" (2020), listed book access as a significant barrier to literacy achievement. Audio books and online read-alouds offer possibilities for students without book access. Since listening comprehension tends to be higher than silent reading comprehension, integrating audio books can foster better understanding of advanced content, increase vocabulary, and build reading skills. Authors of popular series are reading their books chapter by chapter and making the recordings available for free through social media platforms. Lauren Tarshish, author of the popular *I Survived* series, has read [\*I survived the sinking of the Titanic\*](#) (2011) and is currently reading *I survived the destruction of Pompeii, AD 79* (2014). Tarshish with the help of her friendly dog, Roy, infuses think aloud strategies and even some inquiry challenges within her animated readings.

### **Assessing Student Progress**

During this COVID-19 pandemic, educators are asking how they should assess student learning. We suggest incorporating exploratory assignments, such as those involving problem-based and product-based learning. In his recent AMLE webinar, Rick Wormeli (2020) supports using these more authentic assessments in online learning because they allow students multiple ways to demonstrate understanding. He suggests that teachers then provide feedback in the form

of commentary, placing the importance on student growth rather than the more punitive act of grading, which, at this time would not be an accurate representation of a students’ knowledge, especially given the divide between students who have access to technology and those who do not. Since many states have lifted the standardized testing requirement for this academic year, teachers might feel more comfortable with the idea of incorporating authentic assessments.

### **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrust educators into uncharted territory—what we refer to as *quaranteaching*— as we transition what we know about effective middle level teaching into the digital world. The situation is unique; unlike online learning or homeschooling as some may claim, it is more accurately crisis learning and teaching. However, if we hang on to what we know is important for learning—organization, positivity, purpose, and engagement—as we journey into this new environment, perhaps the task will be less like slaying a dragon and more like discovering a whole new world.

**Table 1**  
*Curated Resources*

<b>Online Platforms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#"><u>Adobe Connect</u></a></li> <li>• <a href="#"><u>Google Classroom</u></a></li> <li>• <a href="#"><u>Edmodo</u></a></li> <li>• <a href="#"><u>Schoology</u></a></li> <li>• <a href="#"><u>Microsoft Teams</u></a></li> <li>• <a href="#"><u>WebEx</u></a></li> <li>• <a href="#"><u>Wide Open Schools</u></a></li> </ul>
<b>Literacy, Audio Books, Articles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#"><u>Storyline Online</u></a></li> <li>• <a href="#"><u>Newsela</u></a></li> <li>• <a href="#"><u>New York Times</u></a></li> </ul>
<b>Discussion Boards</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#"><u>Quicktopic</u></a></li> <li>• <a href="#"><u>NowComment</u></a></li> </ul>

<b>Online Chats</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Hangouts Meet</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">WhatsApp</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Zoom</a></li> </ul>
<b>Games</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Kahoot!</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Quizlet</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Prodigy</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">National Geographic Kids</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Brainpop</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Gimkit</a></li> </ul>
<b>Simulations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Phet simulations</a></li> </ul>
<b>Collaboration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Flipgrid</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Snapchat</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Padlet</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Buncee</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Wakelet</a></li> </ul>
<b>Personalized Learning Resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Edgenuity</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">CK-12</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Amplify</a></li> </ul>
<b>Live Streaming</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Screencastify</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">ClearSlide</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Animoto</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Vimeo</a></li> </ul>
<b>Virtual Field Trips/Online Museums</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">British Museum, London</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">National Women’s History Museum</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">The Metropolitan Museum of Art</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Langley Research Center</a></li> </ul>
<b>Special Learning Needs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Wide Open Schools- Special Learning Needs</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Newsela</a></li> </ul>

<b>English Learners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Wide Open Schools- ELL</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Free Rice - Vocabulary Games</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Write and Improve</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">ESL Lounge</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">English Grammar Guide</a></li> </ul>
<b>Assessment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Go formative</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Plickers</a></li> </ul>
<b>Instructional Platforms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Nearpod</a></li> </ul>
<b>Other Instructional Resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">PBS Learning Media</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">We Are Teachers</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Scholastic Learn at Home</a></li> </ul>
<b>Assistance with Access to Technology/Internet</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">National Digital Inclusion Alliance</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">EveryoneOn</a></li> </ul>

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#### Additional Resources

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