



By Holly McBride

Discover what one social studies teacher learned during her journey from a traditional classroom to an online learning environment.

Into the Virtual Frontier

It was a typical first week back to school at Countryside High in Clearwater, Florida, USA. On Tuesday, I had just made final touches to my classroom when my phone rang and I was offered an online teaching position that would start the following Monday. The offer was frightening because it was beyond the familiar for me, but it could also be an exciting and new professional journey. Without hesitation, I decided to accept the post and venture into the unknown.

The Virtual Classroom

Before I could begin, I had to learn how a virtual school worked—how to access my courses and students, and how to create a plan of action for the semester. Some virtual schools come with prepackaged curricula, meaning curriculum writers create lesson plans and post them in the courses prior to the first day of school. This was the case for my school, but I was permitted to edit, use, or discard the lessons at my discretion.

The weekend before my first day, I spent countless hours surfing around the software, emailing other teachers and administrators for assistance, experimenting with the software's course design, and then homing in on my vision for the semester. My online teaching philosophy, course expectations, and syllabi were the foundation for my courses.

I decided my teaching philosophy would revolve around the asynchronous “anytime, anyplace” method and

use a combination of higher-order thinking and digital age teaching skills. I decided not to use the synchronous approach because I felt the motive behind virtual school enrollment is the desire for a flexible learning environment. With that in mind, I divided my courses into weekly modules that opened on Sundays and closed on Saturdays. Students engaged in various tasks throughout the week and submitted their assignments by Saturday.

Setting up a weekly routine cultivates organization and peace of mind for online teachers. Even though there was a prepackaged curriculum, I wanted to frame my lessons and activities according to my teaching philosophy. I planned lessons on Mondays and Tuesdays, graded on Wednesdays and Thursdays, and contacted students on Fridays. Contacting students sometimes overlapped with grading, and grading would overlap with lesson planning, but I found that setting up a schedule was helpful even though each week could be different. If you choose to set up a synchronous classroom using software like Elluminate, communicate with your colleagues to avoid scheduling conflicts.

Student-Teacher Communication

The most important element of virtual teaching is maintaining effective and regular communication with your students. Because you are physically separated from them and social interaction is limited, a virtual teacher must send emails, make phone calls, or Skype with students as much as possible. To collect contact information, one of the first assignments for my students was to complete a contact log that included their email, parents' emails, phone numbers, and any other necessary form of contact information, such as a Skype user name.

Once I had compiled the contact information, I created a spreadsheet that included a miscellaneous notes

column to keep track of who each student was and what was going on in his or her personal and academic lives.

I make contact with my students at least once a week. For those students who have exceptional grades, communication can occur via email more than once a week because they ask for help more often, look for clarification on assignments, or just want to communicate as they did in a face-to-face classroom.

Positive reinforcement is imperative because it elicits an increase in self-esteem, pride, a sense of accomplishment, and a desire to continue working to their fullest potential. In a recent survey, students loved my ability to maintain regular communication and provide positive reinforcement.

There are times when I cannot provide an immediate answer, but I always email students back to let them know I received their message and will get back to them once I find an answer. This lets them know that I am aware of their inquiries and that they are important.

You may have students whose grades are subpar, and sending an email about your concerns may not be enough. You may want to call or Skype the student and try to motivate them verbally. I've discovered that struggling students tend to ignore emails more often than personal phone calls. If any student is receiving a C- or below, making a phone call each week to see what is going on in his or her life (personal connection) and contacting their parents is a best practice for online teachers.

Lesson Planning, Delivering Content, and Grading

At the beginning of the school year, I was thankful to have some items to use from the prepackaged curricula, but I still had plenty of work ahead of me. I had to modify a plethora of the prepackaged tasks that revealed lower-level thinking and inauthen-

tic learning strategies. For example, during week four of my American Government course, the prepackaged curriculum instructed the students to read a chapter and answer questions. Instead, I had my students act as Florida Congress members, create a piece of legislation related to a social problem in their state, and provide evidence and a rationale for creating their legislation. When finished, they posted their assignments on a discussion board, and I asked them to comment or pose a question about another student's work. This is just a small example of how virtual learning can offer authentic, digital age skill development (research for real-world application) and higher-order thinking skills (problem solving). This assignment also directed my students to interact with one another and take ownership of the content rather than memorize abstract concepts that do not apply to their lives.

Research shows that creating a variety of activities when delivering the content and establishing clear guidelines are crucial for effective online courses. Decide from the beginning how you want to organize your courses (synchronous, asynchronous, or a mixture), because if students are confused with the layout, mechanics, or course expectations, they may give up. My courses are set up in modules where students can work at their own pace, but it is my expectation that they turn in their work by 11 p.m. on Saturdays. If work is late, there is a 25% deduction from their weekly grade unless they notify me in advance. Placing boundaries, guidelines, and expectations while also understanding that life happens will produce a structured and caring learning environment.

Every teacher must also adopt a consistent grading system. Notify your students when grading days are, so they don't email everyday asking for an updated grade. Use academic and participation rubrics, provide

adequate feedback on all assignments, offer tips for improvement on future assignments, and invite student–student or individual assessment options at times. If you find major problems with assignments, have a discussion with your students. Remember, this is an online environment where you do not see your students on a daily basis. If they are not performing well, give them the opportunity to make things up or modify an assignment. Don't assume that your students were born with remarkable motivation and the ability to complete assignments on their own.

Taking the Leap

Online teaching comes with a host of new responsibilities, and you have to stay organized, positive, and up to date on the latest technologies. On my first day, emails and phone calls came rushing in, and I had to remind myself several times throughout the first week

that I would eventually get the hang of virtual school. I realized that an exploratory mindset, motivation, and a positive attitude would be essential for my survival in this new frontier.

Here are a few considerations to keep in mind if you are thinking about teaching online:

- Have patience.
- Be ready for new challenges.
- Adopt a teaching philosophy.
- Create a daily or weekly routine.
- Maintain regular communication with your students.
- Set up organized and authentic courses.

My transition from face-to-face to the online social studies classroom was an enlightening journey. This is the cutting edge of a paradigm shift in K–12 education, and it is important for teachers to understand it. Many teachers may not receive a formal training program and should realize that it is

not always an easy transition. Anything can happen, and never assume that you will have an abundance of time and professional training. After all, I had just five days to prepare for my new position! If you stay organized, remain positive, and build your knowledge, your transition can be a well-organized and gratifying experience.

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