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A New Reality: Getting Remote Learning Right Pages 47-50

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Teacher Collaboration During a Global Pandemic

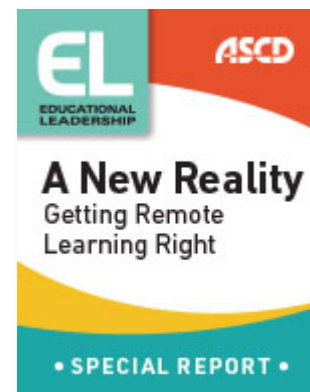
Andrea Honigsfeld and Jon Nordmeyer

Five tips for virtual planning from international educators.

How can staying farther apart bring us closer together? Millions of families around the world—and the many dedicated educators who continue to serve them—are navigating school closures and sudden shifts to new ways of learning due to the novel coronavirus outbreak. We are also seeing unprecedented global cooperation among educators. While collaboration in virtual spaces might not happen the same way as it does in person, connecting with each other, planning around diverse student needs, and figuring out what works has become essential in our current environment.

In many parts of the United States, remote learning has only just started; elsewhere it has become the new normal. We have been working to support professional learning in independent K-12 international schools around the world, many of which have been teaching and learning virtually for months. Both nationally and internationally, educators have been generously sharing what they have learned with us, as well as on Twitter, Facebook, FlipGrid, YouTube, and other digital platforms.

Below, we outline five key takeaways from this work. While these recommendations initially grew out of teaching English learners, we believe they can serve *all* learners.



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1. Take Care of Each Other

First and foremost, let's acknowledge that this new normal is *not* normal. As human beings we seem to be more vulnerable than ever before. As educators, this time we really do not have all the answers. What we do have, however, is each other. Physical distancing cannot and should not mean professional isolation. Just the opposite: We need to start by supporting each other, our students, and their families. As we work together, we not only need to focus on student learning, but also on the overall well-being of our colleagues through empathy, honesty, and generosity.

As we collaborate with colleagues, we can offer social-emotional support and lead honest conversations about what works and what doesn't in this new learning environment. We can share everything: teacher-created materials, freely available resources, curated course content, successes, challenges, and even total fails. For example, Alycia Owen, at the American International School of Guangzhou, China, recently shared [best-practice ideas](#) on Twitter for staying connected with students and families, as well as maintaining personal and professional interactions with colleagues. Many educators have looked to their professional learning networks on social media for encouragement through [virtual book clubs](#), [Twitter chats](#), or wellness challenges.

In the weeks and months ahead, we must consider: What can we do for others? and How can we fully embrace the ethics of care? (Held, 2006) At the core of this principle is educational altruism, or selfless concern for other educators, students, and their families.

2. Plan to Collaborate and Collaborate to Plan

In the past, some teachers might have appreciated the autonomy that closing their classroom door provided them. But in this new context, most teachers don't want to go it alone. As a result, we have witnessed a seismic shift toward a more collaborative mindset. To both support and learn from colleagues, teachers can build in time each week to plan together. Whether working with a grade-level team, department colleague, or support specialist, two heads are better than one. This is especially true when navigating new waters.

A simple co-planning protocol (Dove & Honigsfeld, 2018) has helped many international educators to structure this shared planning time more efficiently:

1. *Pre-planning to agree on norms:* When and how will we meet online, by text, phone, or other modalities? What will we discuss?
2. *Co-planning to ideate:* What will we teach and how will we assess? What will be the sequence of learning experiences?
3. *Post-planning to divide tasks:* Who will find or create specific resources? How will we differentiate?

Because digital practices are so portable, teachers can easily share resources with colleagues within the same school and across schools, countries, and even continents. We seem to have entered a new reality in which collaboration is no longer a luxury; instead, it is a lifeline that allows for teachers to learn about new digital tools, to integrate new teaching activities (both high-tech and low-tech), and to share responsibility for creating online or take-home resources.

In this video, Alexandra Gustad from the American School of Bombay [explains how teachers at her school co-plan](#). And in this video, Gina Ballesteros from the International School of Beijing shares how she [co-plans to support multilingual learners](#) in 2nd grade.

3. Take an Asset-Based Approach

Rather than focusing on "remote" or "distance" or "virtual" classrooms, we can leverage teaching and *learning from home* as an asset. It is important to shift from a deficit-based view of the "challenge" of translating face-

to-face instruction into an online classroom, to an asset-based view: finding new and different opportunities in home learning. When we highlight the assets of parents, siblings, pets, and the things around us that make up a home—rather than just a lonely student stuck in front of a screen—it helps us build on what we know about culturally sustaining pedagogy, place-based learning, and funds of knowledge. For example, when a student's home is multilingual, teachers can build on this resource by encouraging parents to read aloud or discuss assignments in their home language and inviting students to create multilingual projects. This approach helps us to recognize what we *can do* when learning goes home.

How can we make "learning at home" feel more real than virtual? What kinds of offline activities might support students? Teachers can find opportunities to connect curriculum and concepts to students' lived experiences and immediate environment. For example, students might interview siblings for a project or parents can join the classroom morning meeting. Students can also use pets or nearby objects to make connections with their learning. Meghan Wilson at Shekou International School in China shared on Twitter how her students and colleagues are [staying connected, active, and creative at home](#).

4. Think in Chunks: Link Lessons, Resources, and Communication

Most teachers are in the process of building an entirely new online learning ecosystem, or, in the best-case scenario, repurposing an online platform that used to complement face-to-face teaching before the novel coronavirus-related school closures. Since there are so many resources available, teachers often utilize a combination of multiple apps, media, websites, and teacher-created content. This can get overwhelming fast. In order to avoid fragmentation or confusion, teachers can build connections across resources, activities, and lessons.

Building a one-stop shop and sharing a weekly learning plan with students and parents gives them a birds-eye view and road map of the curriculum. Tan Huynh at Saigon South International School in Vietnam shared how he uses a [weekly learning plan](#) or "week at a glance" to prepare students and parents for what lies ahead.

5. One Size Does Not Fit All

We know that every student is different. We also know that teaching a class with a variety of languages, cultures, abilities, and identities enriches the experience for all learners. In online classrooms, teachers must recognize the unique strengths and needs of every student by providing both *high challenge* and *high support* (Mariani, 1997). Every teacher and every school will adapt to the current reality differently based on their unique context and available resources. Teachers recognize the need to collaborate across borders and boundaries, to share what works and what doesn't. As teachers pay attention to linguistic diversity and neurodiversity in their classes, they can rely on the global education community to help provide options for students.

Equity is a critical consideration for online learning: Not all students have the same access to technology, and consistent high-speed internet may not be available in all homes. How can teachers collaborate to ensure learning activities and materials meet the needs of all learners? To ensure they're accessible and mobile-friendly? For example, PDFs are generally more accessible for students with disabilities who may rely on screen-readers.

Choices are an important key to unlocking access for all students in a virtual classroom. [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#) is a framework that helps teachers to plan for multiple means of engagement, multiple modes of representations, and multiple ways for students to take action or express themselves. For example, Chelsea Wilson from Nansha College Preparatory Academy in China explains how she [makes complex texts more accessible](#) by using multilingual and multimodal resources. And Lindsay Kuhl from Seoul Foreign School in Korea shares how she scaffolds texts by using [screencasting for guided reading](#).

Continue the Conversation

As the global K-12 landscape continues to evolve online, collaboration holds the promise of transforming professional relationships, with profound implications for everyone's learning (Nordmeyer, 2015). In the current circumstances, a historical preference for independence and autonomy may be replaced by reciprocal learning.

So let's all continue the conversation. Teachers from four continents are sharing their experiences teaching and collaborating on this [FlipGrid page](#). As we learn together at home and around the world, join these global colleagues and share your insights, questions, or feedback.

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