



CHAPTER 3

How to Teach Unforgettable Lessons & Classes

On Zoom & Google Meet

A Step-by-Step Guide for Educators

Here, you'll find everything you need to know to teach amazing lessons online today.

Best Practices for Teaching Online

Teaching on Zoom or Google Meet will feel different from teaching in-person lessons or classes. Let's take a look at some of the challenges you may face, and some useful tools for overcoming those challenges.

Understanding Where Your Students are Coming From

“When you teach an in-person class or lessons, students aren't required to hyper-focus constantly,” says language teacher and TakeLessons partner, Michele Poteet, “Online, students must look straight at the same screen for any visual cues and rely heavily on their eyes and ears to process information. This can lead to students' eyes, ears, and bodies becoming fatigued from sitting and staring at a screen,”

As humans, a huge portion of our communication is non-verbal. From posture to facial expressions, tone of voice to gestures, and even the distance we stand apart from one another; we're constantly sharing and interpreting information through subtle, silent cues. And because we're social beings, most of us process these cues automatically, without even trying.

On a video call, nearly all of that non-verbal communication is lost. All the subtleties of facial expression, gestures, and body language are flattened out or hidden entirely. This means your brain has a tough job to do. Instead of subconsciously interpreting non-verbal cues so it can consciously digest spoken words, your brain jumps into the driver's seat, both trying to interpret non-verbal cues while also taking in complex spoken information. This overexertion - repeated throughout the day every day - is exhausting for youngsters, teens, and adults alike.

And it doesn't stop there. Not only are we working extra hard to interpret non-verbal cues in a video call, but we're also distracted when we see our own face looking back at us, usually for the entire duration of a video call. It can be challenging to pay close attention to what a teacher (or friend or colleague) is saying, when you're also judging your hair, your clothing, and your background, and on top of that, worrying about whether or not you appear interested.

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What's more, multi-person screens where all the members of a class are displayed as thumbnail videos heighten this problem. Gallery view challenges the brain's central vision, which means your brain is working extra hard to decode each of the onscreen images. As a result, none of the images registers in a meaningful way.

To top all of this off, online lessons keeps us physically distant from each other, so it's easier than ever to make assumptions about other students or downplay our own achievements. For example, in a music class where all students are on mute in order to practice, a student may assume that they aren't singing or playing as well as the others in the class, adding another layer of challenge to weigh that student down.

A combination of self-consciousness, fatigue, and isolation can cause students to engage in negative self-talk that can harm their motivation and empowerment. However, there are real steps you can take to avoid these roadblocks, so each of your students feels empowered, inspired, and experiences success in the online classroom.

As a Teacher, You Have the Power to Overcome These Setbacks

The great news is that as a teacher, you have the tools to overcome these setbacks, and make online learning truly magical for your students.

Below, we'll walk through some tangible pedagogical steps you can take to make online learning feel more human, help your students improve, minimize fatigue while maximizing motivation, and set them at ease during their online learning experience.

Your Presence as a Teacher Counts... For a Lot.

"It takes an extra step to humanize online lessons and to make them feel more personal," says cello and orchestra teacher, Claire Mehm, "and so I always make sure - at the top of every lesson - to spend a few minutes asking how my students are doing and what they've done recently."

Finding ways to make your online teaching feel more human, and to build connections with your students is important. But taking time to chat with your students and relating to them on an interpersonal level isn't the only thing that can break down the virtual barrier between you and your students. One of the most powerful tools you have is to enhance your online teaching presence.

One study of online teaching presence found that students view teaching presence through all the interactions they have with their teacher. That includes emails and announcements, and the way the course itself is organized. Not only will you signal your presence through your tone of voice and attitude, but you'll also signal your presence as a teacher through clarity and organization, and by the flow of your lesson plan.

The digital tools you use, from texts to email communication, screen sharing to the quality of your sound - become an extension of you as a teacher, and investing your energy in developing a holistic approach to your teaching will go a long way in keeping students engaged.

You can take a few easy steps to enhance your online teaching presence:

- Check in with your students mid-week via email or text to see how their practice is going and answer any questions
- Send out a monthly newsletter to spotlight student success stories, share your thoughts as a teacher, and showcase studio news
- Rehearse your lesson plan beforehand with a family member or friend so your live lessons run smoothly
- Use multimedia resources like screen sharing, video recordings, annotation, whiteboard, and the physical environment to change up the way students are receiving information
- Take steps to enhance your sound and video so your students can easily see and hear you without any extra effort

It's important to be present during your online lessons, to greet your student, engage, ask questions, and provide feedback. But in online teaching, you'll want to enhance that presence by using digital tools to show your student that you're there for them. Your competent use of these tools can dramatically enhance the way your students perceive you.

The More Familiar You Are With Your Technology, the More Your Students Will Learn

Presenting information is different in an online environment, and getting familiar with your technology will help you to feel comfortable and confident once you're in your lessons.

“Struggling to find files, links, or browser tabs can cause your stress level to rise, which students will feel and mirror,” says an article in Edutopia, “Close any programs that you won’t be using, and print out your agenda so that you don’t need to frantically search for it on your screen,”

It can be helpful to rehearse your teaching experience before you get started. Walk through your lesson flow, click through your plan and all the different screens you’ll toggle to, and check your sound and video settings.

TakeLessons partners Claire Mehm and Azalea Laredo both recommend having a friend or family member jump on a Zoom or Google Meet call as a rehearsal. Not only should they tell you how your sound and video are, but they should act as meddlesome as possible, “have them push settings and buttons, and fool around with the Zoom environment,” recommends Claire, “this way, you’ll be prepared to deal with even the most difficult student.”

Pace Your Lessons With Online Learning In Mind

While research has shown that in pre-recorded video lessons, short and fast-paced learning enhances retention rates, we also know that many students are experiencing fatigue from online learning, and that you may need to take a creative approach to pacing your lessons in order to help your students register and embody what they’re learning.

“It’s easy to miss those cues that indicate a student may be feeling overwhelmed and you’re giving them too much,” says Claire Mehm, “you kind of have to remind yourself, oh, no, I’ve got to slow this down. We’ve got to do this one step at a time. And if we just learn the letter names and are able to pluck one line of music, that’s a great achievement for today.”

Piano and voice teacher, Phillip Fullerton has noticed that some tasks that would be brief during an in-person lesson simply take more time through a video interface, “leading in-person exercises used to be so easy. Five minutes and the exercises were done, and we’d have the rest of the time to do real work. With online learning, it’ll take at least 10 minutes to do what used to take five minutes,”

Language and music instructor, Azalea Laredo says pacing your lesson, “depends on the student. I have students that would definitely catch on to the topic super quickly, and they would say, ‘I totally know what you’re doing, and I want a little bit more,’”

How Do You Find Out What's Working (Hint: Your Students Can Tell You Best)

In a 2019 study, experienced instructors shared their solution for finding out what works and what doesn't work in a virtual classroom.

It's so straightforward - they simply asked their students. And you can, too.

Sending out a quarterly survey is a great way to find out what's working for your students, and what you can do better. Your students have an entirely different perspective on their learning experience than you do, and they have the keys to improving your lessons. You don't have to get fancy. Create a quick Google Form or even send out questions in the body of an email. Listen closely to the results.

Here are some questions you can ask your students in your survey:

- Have you encountered any technical issues, like not being able to hear me, blurry video, or connectivity issues?
- Are lessons easy-to-follow with clear assignments and ideas? Is there anything that would make the information more understandable?
- What can I do to improve our online classroom? Are there any elements that would make your learning experience even better?

Not only will asking these questions reveal great ideas you can implement to make your lessons and classes even better than they already are, but asking these questions will make your students feel valued - and that's a great way to build a strong and resilient student base.

You can also check in with your students in real time. Every teacher consulted in making this guide recommended finishing each lesson by asking students how they're feeling about the learning process, and whether they're excited about the songs they're learning. It's a great way to wrap up the lesson, and will give you the information you need to constantly improve your lessons.

Structuring Homework & Assignments

"I always make sure to have practice plans with as many students as possible, especially when they're younger. This way, they know exactly what they're supposed to do when they sit down to their instrument," says Claire Mehm.

Students have more work to do at home than ever, and making sure they have clear assignments during the week is essential. Remember to review their assignments at the very end of each lesson. Ask them, “what are you going to practice this week?” and have them repeat their homework back to you.

It can also be valuable to have students record their work at home. To do this:

- Have the student record their assignment at home on a smart phone or computer.
- Ask them to upload their recording to YouTube as an unlisted video
- Have them send you the link to the video the day before their lesson
- Take a few minutes to review their video and jot down notes and ideas
- Review the notes you took with your student, and work on parts together

This is a homework structure that’s used by music and language teachers, theater instructors, tutors, and more. This allows you - as teacher - to listen or watch through their work uninterrupted by internet connectivity issues, and to provide thoughtful notes that transcend the limitations of a video interface.

At the end of each lesson, ask your student what they learned, and have them list their assignments for the week. Students learning via video can benefit from repeating these elements back to you verbally. This helps them process the information, remind themselves of their progress, and makes sure you’re both on the same page at the end of the lesson.

Keeping Students Engaged Throughout a Lesson

In an online lesson or class, how do you keep students engaged? How do you get them to collaborate with you or with each other? This can be a challenge in any learning environment, and with online learning, it takes a certain amount of practice and ingenuity.

1. Have a parent present

For young students, it can be helpful to have parents stay for the lesson, so they can help your student understand the concepts you’re communicating. For very young students, even finding a certain page in a lesson book can be challenging, and having an adult there on the other end of the video interface can help that student learn more effectively.

2. Have students share what they learn

Having students share what they learn will help them fully digest new information and new skills. “I’m always trying to encourage students to play along with me and then say, does anybody want to demonstrate?” says piano and voice teacher, Phillip Fullerton, “there are always kids that do and there are always kids that are wanting to show off their abilities. And I encourage adults to do this, too.”

3. Use the environment

You can also have students use their home environment to engage in their learning experience. “Sometimes when the student looks like they’re fatigued, I ask, ‘is your sister around? Is your brother around? Is your mom around?’ says Azalea Laredo, “‘Oh, she’s right here,’ they might say, ‘Okay!’ I respond, ‘Come together and we’re going to play a little game. We’re going to ask each other questions, and we’re going to have a little circle time.’”

4. Ask questions

Don’t just lecture your students or overload them with information (however valuable that information might be). Find out what questions they have, ask them what kind of material they’re most excited about learning, and have them actively talk through what they’ve learned and what they need to practice. Being curious about where your students are coming from as learners will help them to feel seen and heard, and will put them in a position to actively reflect and engage with the material, rather than passively listening to the lesson.

5. Boost interaction

If you’re working with a group, have participants collaborate with each other and share their work, “The most important thing in a group class is just getting them to interact,” says Phillip Fullerton. Have students ask each other questions in the language they’re practicing, play music for each other, or share their work. Opening up collaboration between students will help them to feel actively a part of the class, rather than isolated in their own home.

Dealing With Lag Time & Enhancing Collaboration With The Mute Tool

As the meeting host, you can both mute yourself and mute your participants. Muting is one of the most powerful collaborative tools available on teaching platforms. Let’s take a look at the different ways musicians can use muting to play along with students in real time, or how all teachers can use mute to increase collaboration during group classes.

1. Muting for Group Classes

Because online interfaces pick up rustling noises and background sound in addition to the sound of voices, muting everyone except the person speaking can be helpful to avoid distractions in a group class. You can use the chat tool to have students submit answers and ask questions, or simply ask students to unmute themselves when they have a question or comment.

Educator Azalea Laredo uses muting to teach a collaborative language game. In the game, everyone in the class is muted, and one person unmutes themselves and asks a question of another person. That person unmutes themselves to answer the question, and then asks a question of another class participant. With only one person unmuted at a time, students can focus on the person asking the question, uninterrupted by background noise. This is also a game you can play with your music or theater students, taking turns to pass the baton from student to student.

2. Muting for Music Teachers

Music teachers around the globe are using the mute tool to lead choirs, orchestras, bands, and other ensembles. It's a valuable tool for both groups and private lessons.

- **Choirs & Ensembles:** If you're leading a choir, try muting all participants, while keeping yourself unmuted. Have students sing along at home by following your voice. Or, play a pre-recorded piece of each choral or instrumental part, and have students sing or play along with the recording. Another option is to download a free metronome app like Smart Click on your mobile device. Put your metronome directly below or near your microphone. Play along with your metronome, and have your students play along with you and with the metronome while they are muted.
- **Private Lessons:** For private lessons, you can mute yourself, keep your student unmuted, and play along with them on your own instrument. This helps you better understand your student's progress by revealing trouble spots and wrong notes. You can also do the reverse, have your student mute themselves, and play a piece while having your student play along with you at home.

Document Sharing for Stronger Engagement

When you're teaching in-person, it's easy to simply hand out documents or sheet music. In an online lesson, document sharing is still important to demonstrate concepts, written material, and visual ideas. In an online lesson, you'll need to prepare ahead and either email documents to your students, or share your screen during a lesson.

Scan Your Documents

Scanning documents is easy with the Notes app on an iPhone or by downloading the free, Adobe Scan app. Once you've scanned the documents, you can either email them to your students, or you can show them using the **screen share** button in Zoom or the **present** button in Google Meet.

Screen Sharing

Make sure the document you want to share is open on your computer or device, and that other windows are closed. Then, click the **Share Screen** button at the bottom of your Google Meet or Zoom window. Google Meet and Zoom will then ask you whether you want to share your entire screen, or just one window. Highlight the document you want to share, choose the share one window option, and then click on the **share** button.

Checklist for Online Teaching

Luckily, there are some proven ways that you can enhance your online lessons, so your students can stay energized and engaged throughout. Language educator, Michele Poteet uses this list to ensure her lessons are successful, and you can too! Let's use this list to review what we covered in this chapter.

1. Connect

Take a minute at the beginning of your lesson to ask your student or students how they're doing, what they've been up to, and how their week has been. This is your moment to break the virtual barrier and create a more human feel for your lessons.

2. Read the Room

Check in with students throughout the lesson or class time, and stay tuned in to how much information they're digesting, or whether they might be feeling overwhelmed. Leave them room to ask a question or demonstrate their understanding, in a group class, you can do this by asking them to show you a hand cue (e.g. thumbs up or numbering system on the fingers).

3. Diversify Your Material

Provide written, spoken, and visual material so that learners have many different ways to digest new information. Use the screen sharing and whiteboard features, the environment, and other multimedia tools to diversify the way you deliver information.

4. Make it accessible

Use closed captioning to ensure fully equitable access for everyone and to benefit students with different learning styles.

5. Allow for Processing Time

Some students need additional processing time, especially in an online learning environment. Consider creating material for students to access later, so they can revisit concepts from the lesson or practice what they've learned outside of class.

6. Keep it Manageable

Organize your lessons in manageable chunks, with question and answer sessions interspersed throughout. Don't overload your student with too much information, and instead, focus on one thing, and celebrate their accomplishments.

7. Use Engaging Audio & Visuals

Use compelling audio and visual examples to deepen learners' understanding of key terms and concepts. If bandwidth allows, ask all participants to turn on their cameras to encourage engagement.

8. Check in With Your Students

Both at the end of your lesson and via surveys and email check-ins to see if questions have come up in order to help students feel seen and heard, and to give them the opportunity to share their thoughts.

Stay Tuned To Your Students... & To Yourself

Online teaching is an exciting and revolutionary field. As an online teacher, you will have the opportunity to share your craft with students - not just in your region - all over the world.

Teaching online will present some challenges, and it can be important to remind yourself that every student has their own learning style, and that as an educator you need to take care of yourself.

1. Every Student is Unique

Every student is unique, with their own learning style and goals, and every lesson will feel different. Be aware of what's working and what's not working, and be open to finding ways you can improve your online teaching strategy.

2. Take Care of Yourself

Of course, taking care of yourself is a huge part of providing exceptional lessons. Make sure you have water available, that you give yourself a chance to have a snack, and schedule in break times throughout the day to give yourself a chance to recharge.

Most importantly, remember that you're making a difference. Piano and Spanish language instructor, Azalea Laredo puts it best, "You're just there to guide them and connect with them for an hour, or even for half an hour. Be patient and know that you are making a change. You are helping them. You're helping them for the better, and you're a little light in this whole chaos."

By being present, caring for yourself, and staying tuned in to your students' experience, you'll be a light in the chaos, and you'll be well on your way to teaching amazing online lessons.

Hey... You Got This!

Teaching online can be challenging. But with a little preparation, you can create an education experience that's rewarding for both you and your students.

If you haven't already, now's a great time to start teaching with TakeLessons, and if you're looking for more resources for teaching and learning online, check out the TakeLessons Blog.