

START STRONG

in the Remote School Year



Five Instructional Shifts Teachers Can Make

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THE BUS IS LEAVING...

... and school is starting, no matter what else is going on around us. Students will come to our virtual classrooms possessing talents and attributes worth celebrating, as well as worries and concerns from the past few months. To nurture our students well, we must first nurture ourselves as teachers and as humans.

This year will undoubtedly bring major transformation, which will ultimately be the silver lining in this huge challenge that awaits you. As you venture into back-to-school season for a year that's nothing like ever before, you may experience some anxiety or lack of confidence in the preparation it takes for doing distance learning justice.

Congratulations! You are human. This “forced innovation” will not only challenge you and your practice, but it will also be an opportunity to model for your students what [productive struggle](#) and [growth mindset](#) look like, as well as what it truly means to being a lifelong learner.

Just remember to:

- **Be forgiving in the schedule you set for yourself.** Take small “chunked” breaks throughout the day to give your eyes that much-needed rest from the computer screen.
- **Celebrate something new you learned or tried for the very first time!** It may have not gone perfectly, but that's okay... you were brave and made the attempt! Find the celebration in the small successes. Consistent, small changes over time can lead to great transformation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MAKING MISTAKES

You will be learning shoulder-to-shoulder with your students as you venture into this new world of teaching—which you once felt you'd mastered. Making mistakes alongside them is teaching them about vulnerability and the human condition. These are both necessary when it comes to creating a safe and healthy learning environment and can actually increase the amount of learning that takes place.

There is no failure – only valuable and welcomed feedback.

that you totally messed up your lesson, or of using the good old fallback of “I was just checking to see if you were paying attention.” (Admittedly, I used that quite often.) A new class mantra might be, “Mistakes are Mandatory.” So get ready to make some! Make them, fake them...and truly CELEBRATE them! The word “failure” should not exist in your self-talk (or in your classroom at all for that matter). Try substituting that “F word” with “feedback”. So another new mantra for your class might be, “There is no failure...only valuable and welcomed feedback.”

Mistakes are wonderful opportunities to learn, and our students need to see these moments of learning modeled for them. Gone are the days of hiding

In addition to embracing mistakes, you can also relieve some of the pressure by considering a few new practices as you plan back-to-school activities for remote instruction. Even if you have already launched your school year, it's never too late to pause, reflect, or redirect your practice in order to help your digital natives transition into confident digital learners. Just remember to be patient and kind to yourself as you learn side by side with your students, truly becoming their learning partner.

Be forgiving and give yourself some grace. You would never expect your students to do things accurately and perfectly the first time out of the gate but, for some reason, teachers uphold that impossible standard for themselves. You are human, and we are all on this bus together.

1. CONTENT WILL COME.

"If you build it...they will come"—*Field of Dreams*

It's the same thinking when it comes to starting the digital school year strong. Shifting to a mindset of "Content will Come" will not only ease your students' burden of learning to navigate the digital space while learning content (triple that burden for English Learners!), but it will build confidence and level the playing field for all of our learners.

Teachers know that the more time they spend upfront discussing classroom rules, routines, and procedures, the less likely they are to have interruptions during instruction throughout the year. The same is true for a digital classroom; however, due to the recent shifts in the instructional setting, our rules, procedures and expectations should also shift. In addition to students mastering the digital tools during back-to-school, we must take our time and be extremely intentional when laying the groundwork for our new learning environment.

Expectations regarding digital citizenship, webinar etiquette, establishing the learning setting, and daily structure should be clearly communicated and practiced during the first few weeks of school. Having more specific conversations about completing pre-class assignments, how to handle learning obstacles during asynchronous time, as well as what feedback might look like, are all now appropriate and necessary conversations to have.

Take your time to establish these norms and communicate them concisely prior to launching into any content. As you start to transition to content, begin your daily morning routine by revisiting these classroom mantras so that they are eventually automatic. This will help create solid digital learning habits sooner rather than later for your students.



If students have solidified their digital navigation skills first, as well as have a secure "I can" attitude towards them, they are more likely to think, "I can learn this, too" as they transition to content. This can often be 99% of the battle, because a confident child is more likely to be a capable and intrinsically motivated child. If you launch into content too soon, students can lose their motivation.

Pulling an unenthusiastic learner back in to master the learning outcomes is always much more challenging than keeping them engaged along the way. It's much easier to keep a plane in the air than to land, build momentum,

and lift—ultimately taking off again. Learning momentum can be established and maintained in your students, ironically, by starting slowly. Go slow to go fast by focusing on the HOW vs. the WHAT at first; the WHAT in your content will come, regardless of WHERE it occurs.

2. EXPLORE IT, DISCOVER IT, SHARE IT

Allowing students the opportunity to explore and discover can transform the learning trajectory, pacing, as well as the class climate and attitudes of our learners. Remember when you received your first smartphone? How did you learn to use it? No doubt it was at your own pace, on your own path, with choice in what you learned, and you discovered things on your own, creating a better “hold” of the information.

Back-to-school season is no different. It should involve DAILY exploration, practice, and a structured play time in the platform students are going to use all year for their required learning. Skills, whatever they are, become learned habits when they are made a consistent priority upfront, allowing them that powerful time to marinate in them.

If your students use an e-book and all of the related tools on a daily basis, it won't be considered difficult anymore (just like using your smartphone.) The more times they get access and opportunity to experiment, the better they'll know it and retain it. Have you ever seen a 5-year-old at a restaurant grab a parent's iPad and play Animal Crossing? We all have. They know exactly what to click on, where to go, the rules of the game, and its end goal. It's clear this is not their first time using it.

When I hear someone say, “This is too hard for my students!” I always think, “How much have you allowed them to truly experiment and play with it?” I know that if I don't do something regularly, I tend to get rusty, especially as I get older. It's even more true for students who are learning and seeing concepts for the first time, whose cognitive abilities and brain functions are still developing, and who are now being asked to perform more rigorous tasks at an even earlier stage of life than ever before.

*Children are naturally curious
and want to talk about what
they wonder and notice.*

Like learning to use a new device in our own lives, discovering tools and functions independently creates a student experience which is much more likely to be retained. We remember experiences. Couple that with the opportunity to share with or teach someone else, you get a whiz-bang recipe for results! Most teachers know that we remember 99% of what we teach someone else. Every teacher can easily name a concept that they learned through the art of teaching.

In addition to exploration time, children are naturally curious and want to talk about what they wonder and notice. With the multiple hats an educator must wear, the limited time and resources they have, and all the added pressure of performance placed upon them, we've basically taught this natural “need to know” out of our students because it's not a priority.

Give students just one tool a day to explore during their independent time. It's feasible with the flexibility of your classroom model, whether that's a hybrid approach or 100% remote. You will also be pleasantly surprised how quickly they become accustomed to the tool (no matter the grade). Try asking students about "Today's Tool" with questions like:

- "What do you notice?"
- "What did you discover?"
- "What was your favorite part (or the most difficult part)?"
- "What do you still wonder about it?"
- "What could you use this for in your daily learning?"



LET THEM TELL YOU what they found and how they work; LISTEN to what they want to share. These are all great examples of stepping aside, jumping in the passenger seat, and allowing them to drive. Students will appreciate an opportunity to reflect and share out and be heard. Reflection is one thing that our students don't do enough. We tend to focus on what they need to know, the way it's done, and simply give them the information. However, a one-way street is often a dead-end street. If you provide students with the opportunity to pause, reflect, and discuss, you are not only teaching them important metacognitive and communicative skills, but they will also feel valued and appreciated. They will know that they have a voice and a choice in their learning and are value in your space as well. As Dr. Douglas Fisher writes in his book of the same name, "All learning is social and emotional."

During the first weeks of school:

- Consider some guided explorations or digital scavenger hunts of all the learning tools and resources that they will be using all year on their student portal.
- Allow student choice in what they want to learn first and the opportunity to share the various functions with their peers. That might be logging in, finding this week's stories, and clicking on the audio for a beginning Kindergarten.
- Ask them what they discovered on their own or wondered about another feature within their digital text.
- Allow them to teach the class by "sharing the mouse", showing what they discovered or learned. Make sure to allow DAILY time for exploration and discovery upfront. It will transform your class, no matter where it is taking place.

3. FLIP THE SCRIPT

Decipher all the elements that are a priority (think priority standards) in your first week or two of CONTENT.

(Notice I didn't say first weeks of SCHOOL. See #1 above.)

Then, think about which activities from these concepts your students can do/navigate/attempt on their own FIRST. They're not aiming to master these activities – just trying.

One of the most effective - yet underused - teaching strategies in the elementary setting is pre-teaching or previewing BEFORE the actual teacher instruction. Flipped learning is nothing new in the blended secondary arena. Teachers have found that when students come to class, having had their first exposure to a concept via a short video, more class time is freed up for interacting, enrichment activities, projects, intervention, and small groups.

Students can revisit, slow down, pause, and reflect.

It can be even more beneficial for our striving learners as well as ELLs. If we can send them short, digital tutorials that explain the concept upfront, we are ultimately giving students control and putting them in the driver's seat. Students can revisit, slow down, pause, and reflect.

Why is this important? You are giving them total control of the pace of the lesson (a game changer for students with various processing issues). This "YouTube Generation" really benefits from this way of learning, as it speaks to how they seek out information every day in their own lives.

It may sound like heavy preparation is involved, but these should be short and sweet, only 3 to 5 minutes (7–8 maximum for intermediate students). It should be just enough time to cover the concept AND keep their attention. Try not to do too many examples, as well. As teachers, we tend to over-teach and over-explain things too frequently.

For example: for a lesson on foundational skills in a primary classroom, you might normally follow a gradual release routine such as MODEL, GUIDED, PRACTICE. Look at the example on the next page.



How We Are USED to Doing It:

MODEL: We would probably be in whole group with our students doing a show and tell with lots of descriptions and the teacher talking. This is usually the bulk of time within the lesson block.

GUIDED: We would start allowing them to join in, simulating at their desk what I do on the board or projector, or maybe even sharing the pen on chart paper while sitting on the floor. Collaboration with table groups or partners might also ensue. The teacher might start walking around to see who is struggling, but oftentimes there is still a lot of explaining and directing with very limited time to identify all of the students who may be falling behind.

PRACTICE: This may be them alone at their desks or in partners while small groups are pulled at the horseshoe table. Whatever the assignment is, it is often the expectation that the unfinished work becomes homework, which cannot only create more work at home for our lower level students, it creates more to do/go over at the beginning of class the next day, reducing further the learning time scheduled.

Sounds familiar doesn't it? Now, let's FLIP the SCRIPT!

Flipped Example:

MODEL: This happens during asynchronous learning time at home as "homework" prior to the actual lesson. Before any explanation or clarification of the skill is given, students come to the class "lesson" having already "previewed" a quick 3–5-minute video of the teacher doing direct instruction. The strugglers might have watched it five times or paused it and watched it in ever shorter chunks due to interruptions at home or attention deficits. Maybe there's only one device being shared among three siblings. The ones who had the skill down, fast-forwarded through it and slammed their laptop shut, turning their attention towards a long-term project or workstation activity.

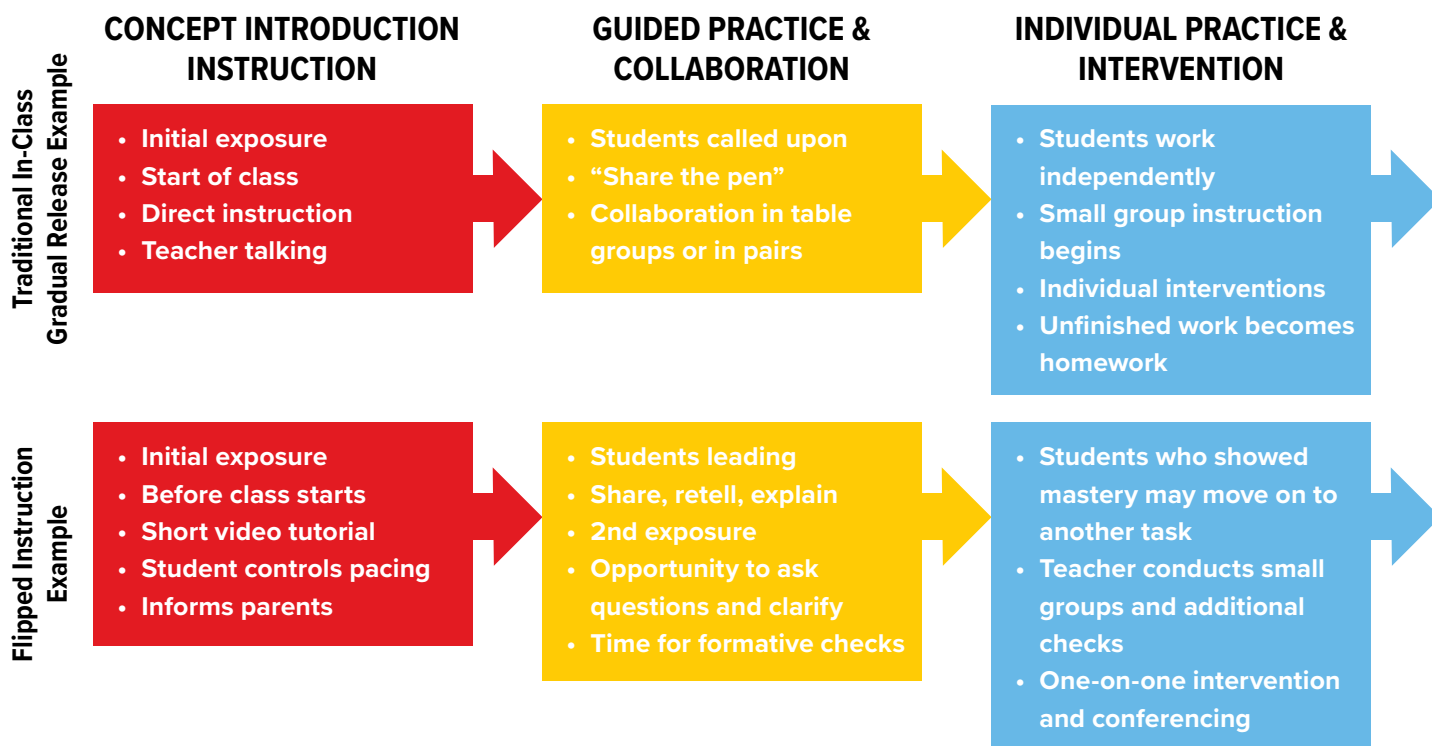
GUIDED: Here's where the teacher and students begin their time together: synchronous time. Now, their time with me STARTS with collaboration. I may have a student walk me through and give the step-by-step instructions back. Maybe a chain of students piggy-back on each other's instructions with the next step, simply put, "retelling" the lesson. The students become the teachers here (because they will remember 99% of it, remember?). This becomes an additional learning opportunity for my students who missed it the first time, as well as a formative piece for me in the moment, as to who is going to need some support still later today. Here I can utilize the message or chat forum in my digital platform, asking for some small bits of data for students. I will really need to pay attention here, as this part of the lesson is going to determine next steps. It is a conversation that also allows time for clarifying questions students may still have after last night's video, because maybe they were hung up on just one little thing.

PRACTICE: This is time that students work independently who have the skill, or maybe if they've proven their performance, can then move on to tomorrow's flipped lesson or an ongoing project they're working on at home. You can condense the practice work by offering students to "compact" out of it. Compacting is when students can quickly prove their knowledge and move on. Provide all students 5 of the most challenging questions from the practice work FIRST, (also referred to as the "hardest first" strategy). If they get 4 or 5 correct, release them from the additional practice. Allow those students to "compact out" of doing 25 more problems. A student is going to make the same mistakes on 5 problems that they would on 30. The same is true with reading or writing a paragraph versus an entire short story or essay, for example. Ask for a small sample to make things doable for you during these often abbreviated, distance-learning situations...but will still provide you a sufficient amount of accurate and valid formative data.

If you are required by your district to fulfill a certain number of instructional minutes, send your students off and bring them back, in a “catch and release” format. The practice time is really a time that I would dedicate to my striving students. I might start with some small group instruction, doing a quick check again, and then one-on-one conferencing with a student or two that still need me.

Reteaching doesn’t mean doing the same thing slower, louder, and with more hand gestures; make sure you have multiple resources because these students require a different entry point. When reteaching, the strategy and/or resource you are using should change if you want change to happen.

The homework then becomes the next lesson’s 3–5-minute tutorial video. If we are reviewing tomorrow and not learning a new skill yet, my students can watch the video again or I may have a second version prepared as a refresher video for those who need it, showcasing the same skill but with different examples or strategies. Students can even make their own video of them teaching a parent, sibling, or pet! Get creative!



Ultimately, flipping the instruction has benefits for everyone involved. You can get a good idea of where they all are because you have more time to dedicate to that part of the lesson. Don’t be afraid to dabble with this strategy that has worked well for secondary grades for years. It can work even BETTER in elementary, given the importance of early intervention and small group time combined with shorter attention spans. Instead of having the daily (and often emotional) homework battle, families are able to watch a 3-minute video, perhaps together, talk about it, and be done. What a great (and easy) way to keep parents informed!

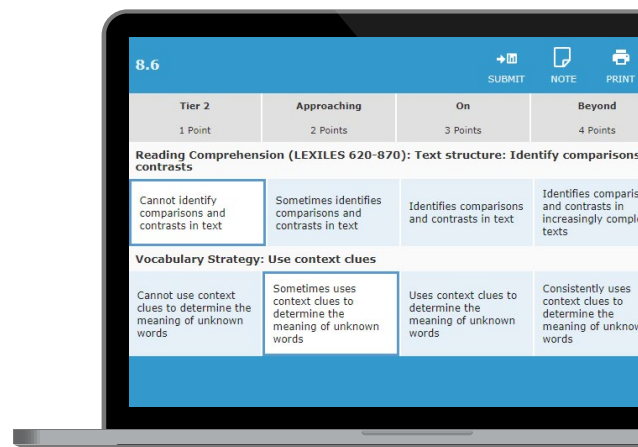
Flipping the script will not only give you more time to identify what your students know and don’t know, but your striving students will appreciate the ability to control the pace of the lesson. All of your learners will feel that they are your teaching and learning partners, that they have a voice, and they are getting just what they need. Your teacher-student relationships will vastly improve. Start those tutorials now! Maybe just try a recording on Zoom or PowerPoint, or you can even download a free, user-friendly recording program that sits right on your desktop.

4. THE DIGITAL ASSESSMENT DYNAMIC

Digital Assessments add an additional demand to this remote learning dynamic. Consider taking anecdotal data during your virtual small groups or conferencing while in your first unit of content. You will need this informal data, because, as explained below, giving a digital test the first several weeks of school can literally undo all the progress you just made with practices 1-3.

Some ELA programs, such as *Wonders* by McGraw Hill, utilize an interactive observational online rubric which syncs to the reporting portal. Online rubrics like this only require a few seconds to fill out for each child, so it's quick and easy, but extremely valuable because you will still need this data during these first weeks of instruction while you are teaching those test-taking skills.

Specific test-taking skills and navigational tools should be taught and woven throughout the regular lessons during back-to-school season. Modeling how to navigate a test and utilize skills such as previewing a test question before the read are very valuable and will only assist any system you currently use to provide more valid data.



The screenshot shows a digital assessment rubric for item 8.6. It features a table with four performance levels: Tier 2 (1 Point), Approaching (2 Points), On (3 Points), and Beyond (4 Points). The rubric is divided into two sections: 'Reading Comprehension (LEXILES 620-870): Text structure: Identify comparisons and contrasts' and 'Vocabulary Strategy: Use context clues'. Each section has four corresponding performance level descriptions.

Tier 2 1 Point	Approaching 2 Points	On 3 Points	Beyond 4 Points
8.6			
Reading Comprehension (LEXILES 620-870): Text structure: Identify comparisons and contrasts			
Cannot identify comparisons and contrasts in text	Sometimes identifies comparisons and contrasts in text	Identifies comparisons and contrasts in text	Identifies comparisons and contrasts in increasingly complex texts
Vocabulary Strategy: Use context clues			
Cannot use context clues to determine the meaning of unknown words	Sometimes uses context clues to determine the meaning of unknown words	Uses context clues to determine the meaning of unknown words	Consistently uses context clues to determine the meaning of unknown words

Remember the first year your state took their standardized state test online? Everyone bombed! Scores were TERRIBLE. Why? Because we couldn't tell what may have been navigational or logistical errors, versus actual lack of content knowledge. I equate this with a student receiving a 0 on an essay prompt because they didn't write to the specific prompt-writing their piece on something else. The 0 didn't represent what could have possibly been beautiful writing – just on a different topic!

*To make the
assessment experience
authentic, teachers
need to be present.*

Use the weekly/biweekly digital test as a LESSON! Maybe even FLIP that lesson too! Also, give opportunities (practice #2) to play and discover the tools by assigning sample tests and FORGET about the content on the test (practice #1) If they can't navigate a digital assessment, how are they going to communicate what they know? Process over product is the goal. If digital learners are provided multiple opportunities to practice digital test-taking, merged with intentional instruction from you, we are already creating assessment-capable DIGITAL learners!

When should they do their tests? Firstly, only AFTER your students are “digitally-savvy” with test-taking, because otherwise, what's the point? Scores would be totally invalid. Test-taking time should also be during TEACHING TIME in a digital model. Why? Students need to be able to ask questions. They may have a crafty older brother in HS at home who can jump on and take it for them or a well-intentioned parent who helps their child a little too much. There are so many issues that can come up that would absolutely result in inaccurate data.

If we're not going to over-test students, we need to make it count! To make this experience authentic, teachers need to be present. Also, think about when you assign things and the settings of the testing window that your platform provides. When should it be open and available to students? Maybe that's only during the time with you. Now that they are working remotely, if you don't set that window to a very intentional and specific time, WHO KNOWS whose scores those really are!

5. MODEL, MODEL, MODEL

Model, model, model. We can't expect our learners to be completely digitally savvy, and not be savvy ourselves.

I don't mean modeling in the traditional mindset (the "I DO" step in the gradual release model.) If we are going to have a certain expectation of students using certain tools and functions, we must use them consistently during our instruction, whether that's face to face, in our video tutorials, small group instruction, or during a one-to-one conference.

*Teaching digitally does **NOT** automatically mean the lesson will be interactive and engaging.*

Sharing your screen should be a regular practice, but make sure to invite students in to "share the mouse" with you, so it doesn't become a stagnant, one-way, "sit and get" exercise. Teaching digitally does NOT automatically mean the lesson will be interactive and engaging. Getting their attention and holding it, even for a ten-minute remote lesson, is going to be the most important layer to all of this – and the most challenging! If you can engage them well, they will feel safe, motivated, and accountable, which will be replicated in their retention! Let students drive the instruction as much as possible. Zoom and most other web-conference platforms have a setting where you can allow a participant to take charge of the screen remotely. It may take a lot of practice up front, but imagine how empowered the students will feel controlling YOUR screen!

Don't let them see you sweat! Is it okay to show your uncertainty or that you made a mistake? **ABSOLUTELY**. What you don't want your students to see is that you are not embracing this new normal. [Emotions are contagious](#). If your attitude doesn't show that you buy into this new way of instruction or that you are petrified, frustrated, or angry over it, your students will have no buy-in either and their learning will continue to suffer. This is another possible obstacle of which to try your best to steer clear. It's good and purposeful to show mistakes... but not a bad attitude. Embrace the struggle and model it.



