

Guidelines for Online Teaching

Introduction

Following the closure of in-person schooling, new possibilities and challenges emerged. Online teaching is a relatively new approach, so there is not one set way to go about it. With some research and preparation, a lesson can be successfully delivered as if in an in-person setting.

Human interaction in an online classroom should not be considered optional. On the contrary it is at the basis of any learning and teaching experience. It is a fact that, not all learners have the intrinsic motivation to work through the content and submit tasks on their own, as this entails a high level of drive and skill which varies from learner to learner. Educators play a very important role in keeping learners engaged and helping them to succeed. Meaningful learning experiences calls for putting the learner always at the centre of all pedagogical endeavours be it online or not. Nonetheless for these efforts to be successful, there needs to be a collaboration with all stakeholders.

Online teaching allows conventional schooling to be flexible, allowing educators and learners not to be in the same physical space at all times. Through online-learning, learners are exposed to a spectrum of learning and teaching strategies which aim to cater for a variety of learners' needs.

This approach combines **synchronous** e-learning strategies that happen in real time, and **asynchronous** e-learning strategies whereby the educator and learners' interactions occur at different times and locations. It is up to the educator to determine the balance for and the time dedicated to both synchronous and asynchronous tasks depending on the learners' age, needs, abilities, aptitudes and other classroom dynamics. This approach offers teachers the benefits of a real time classroom alongside the advantages of modern technology, paving way to a higher level of interactivity which might not be possible in a conventional classroom.

In the case of real time sessions educators have to make sure that the slot in question is in line with the official school time-table so that conflicts with other educators' sessions are avoided.

Synchronous vs Asynchronous E-Learning

Real Time (Synchronous) learning is the type of learning one participates in when sitting in a class (real or online). It takes place in real time with a teacher/Learning Support Educator who leads the session while encouraging active participation from learners. When this takes place online synchronous e-learning refers to live sessions whereby learners and teachers interact in real time with each other.

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Non-Real time (Asynchronous) learning is the type of learning a learner does on his own and at his own pace. Interactions with the teacher occur at different times and different locations. Examples of asynchronous e-learning include email/notes exchanges, discussion boards, recordings of lessons and/or audio clips, presentations and blogs/vlogs.

Resources prepared by the teacher in both synchronous and asynchronous activities including, videos, notes, power point presentations, links and audio files are made available online to learners who will be able to access them according to their own schedules and locations. The resources and content made available are scaffolded in such a manner as to reach all learners.

Why the need for guidelines?

These guidelines should serve as a practical reference to guide and support educators in lesson planning and delivery of online learning and teaching experiences. The document also complements the guidelines issued by local authorities on schools' re-opening as well as the Teachers' Code of Ethics and Practice, which sets out the key principles of good conduct and practice for educators in Malta and Gozo. What are the benefits of online learning and teaching?

- Increasing learners' autonomy, motivation and agency
- Reaching out to all learners by embracing technology
- Offering accessibility
- Providing flexibility, efficiency and accountability
- Supporting the development of digital competence
- Aiding the educator to become a facilitator for learning.

Steps for an effective online lesson:

1. Planning and organization stage

- With regards to the platform of choice, educators are to discuss and agree at school level on which online systems to use.
- MySchool and Microsoft Teams are the recommended platforms supported by IMU and DDLTS (see circular - DDLTS 26/2020).
- It does not matter whether the lesson is delivered online (both in real and non-real time) or in-person, planning ahead is crucial.
- In the case of a real-time session, it is advisable that an attendance is taken at the end of the lesson. In the case of non-real time interaction with learners, the feedback provided by the learner can count as attendance.
- Prepare for Plan B in case something goes wrong during the execution of the lesson.
- When planning, take into consideration which resources learners have at their disposition. In case of learners who have difficulty accessing resources needed to follow sessions, liaise with the SMT to support them.
- Always keep in mind the different learning needs of each learner.
- Set up a quiet space to prepare and/or carry out your lesson in a productive manner.
- Try to keep your workspace free from as many distractions as possible. Make sure your workspace and the surroundings in which you will be carrying out the session are fit for purpose. You can also opt to blur your surroundings.
- Natural lighting and an ergonomic chair can help to set up the ideal work environment.
- In case of a real time lesson, arrive early to set up for virtual class and be ready to stay a few minutes after the lesson to support any learner that needs extra assistance.
- Schedule specific weekly contact time with learners, both real time and non-real time sessions. With regards to the duration of the session, one should keep in mind the age of the learners as well as their attention span.
- Establish agreed-upon communication mechanisms that allow learners to get in touch with you when and if needed. In the case of learners in the early years ensure that their parents and/or guardians are aware of when real time sessions are going to take place.

- In the case of classrooms with SEN (Special Educational Needs) learners, share your planning with the Learner Support Educator/s.
- Be attentive to presentation when planning lessons and content both for real time session as well as non-real time. This goes a long way into keeping learners engaged. Videos, power point presentations and/or other visuals will make the content more accessible and meaningful to all learners. When preparing resources for learners to access on their own make sure that clear instructions are provided alongside the material.

2. Goals/Aims of the lesson

- When giving an instruction and/or a task to learners, make sure to explain what is expected from them. This is also valid when giving assignments or any other task for learners to do on their own.

3. Student participation and engagement

- Initiate and encourage constant communication with learners and amongst learners themselves.
- Provide them with materials which will increase their engagement (hands on/interactive tasks).
- Engage with learners and provide guidance through clear explanations, questioning and use of visuals.
- Material planned to be used during the lesson, be it real time or not, should encourage the active participation of learners.
- Devise practical ways how to keep learners motivated, engaged and on task. Examples include deadlines and rewards for participating and submitting work.

4. Lesson Delivery

- Make sure that things are explained systematically ie. on a step by step basis. Look for ways to break down complex tasks or concepts so that learners can make timely progress and receive feedback from the educator. This kind of scaffolding does not happen as naturally in online classes, as it does in physical classrooms due to the limitations of online interactions.
- When preparing lessons, do not be scared to experiment with tools and/or teaching methods to provide learners with a varied and creative learning experience. Different tools support different learners to reach their maximum potential whilst reducing barriers.

- Scrutinize all the assignments you intend to give to learners and deconstruct them on a step-by-step basis as would happen in an in-person classroom.
- Examples you provide to learners would aid understanding and confidence to succeed.
- Educators should find ways of promoting learners' collaboration to make learning more meaningful and interactive.

5. Virtual classroom management

- Clarify to learners that educators cannot be available online 24/7 to answer queries. Establish clear time frames when parents can communicate with educators.
- Set up a set of online etiquette (netiquette) rules which respect the nature of the relationship between educator and learner. These include attire worn during real time sessions, language used both verbal and written, conducive and appropriate behaviour to learning and timely submission of work.
- The educator should consider to mute microphones if and when necessary to allow any one person to speak at a time. The 'Raised Hand' function, the 'Chat Box' and/or the 'Question and Answer' function should be used to manage classroom interactions. These tools facilitate learning and should be used appropriately. The teacher can appoint a moderator amongst the learners to monitor and highlight issues and queries that might arise during the course of the lesson.
- Positive interaction between the educator and learners, and the learners amongst themselves is Key. In the case of real time sessions, greeting learners, smiling, making eye contact and encouraging learners to collaborate with each other is important.

6. Resources

- Prepare varied resources that spark participation.
- Use existing resources which are readily available online.
- Provide learners with the skills to identify good and valid resources and avoid material which might not necessarily help them with the content they are covering in class.
- Provide learners with the opportunity to discuss with you any material and or difficulties which they might have encountered online.

7. Tools

- A reliable computer, a stable internet connection and a learning and teaching platform which you are most confident with.
- Check that the configuration (laptop + internet + platform) is working efficiently.

8. Communication

- Maintain a consistent online presence.
- Get to know who your class members are, in order to ensure a smoother transition from in-person session to online.
- Make sure the learners know the best methods and times to contact you.
- Foster a classroom community.
- Motivate learners to communicate and collaborate amongst themselves.
- Be ready to support and motivate learners.
- Create an agreed upon communication channel with parents (particularly in the Early Years).
- Establish a communication network with Learning Support Educators to ensure that all material prepared is accessible to all learners in class.
- It is encouraged that support and/or training is sought. SMT members or other MFED officers can provide you with assistance and guidance to meet such requirements.

9. Feedback and Assessment

- Reflect on what learners have learnt in order to determine the next step in learning.
- Both summative and formative assessment can take place on virtual platforms. Choose in which circumstances the learning process would benefit from a summative task and/or a more formative on-going one. Meeting learners virtually should not hinder the use of continuous assessment practices which are seamlessly integrated in the learning and teaching process.
- Assessment procedure and guidelines should be made clear for all learners, no matter the choice of assessment strategy adopted.
- Create a system which makes it easy for learners to follow content, tasks for assessment and learning activities.

- Educators can consider creating smaller group real-time sessions to provide feedback to learners. This would make it easier to reach out to all learners.
- Having one platform for assessment purposes, will help learners keep their work organized and aware of what they have to do next.
- Clearly state assessment due-dates and post in the same folder/platform where the assessment tasks reside.

10. Asking for support/feedback

- Seek the advice and support of colleagues who are also trying to master the ins and outs of online teaching.
- Discuss your experiences of online teaching with colleagues. Create opportunities to share good practices.
- Seek as many opportunities as possible to improve your online teaching skills.

11. Lesson Closure

- Notwithstanding that classroom dynamics in an online environment are undeniably different from those of an in-person setting, a lesson still benefits from a proper conclusion.
- In the case of a real time sessions, a proper conclusion would provide learners with the opportunity to reflect on what they have learnt and discuss with you any issues they might have, thus enabling them to work independently on the task assigned.

12. Lesson Evaluation

- Reflect on the online experience being provided to learners. This will aid you in improving the learning and teaching process with the aim of reaching all learners.
- Seek different ways of collecting feedback from learners about the online learning and teaching experience offered.

Ground Rules

- In the case of real time sessions, be yourself as much as possible – use this to fuel energetic communication. Remember that students appreciate seeing your face and hearing your voice. Do not be afraid to use humour, pauses, facial expressions, different vocal intonations and/or gestures for emphasis. You are as much a ‘performer’ online as you are in a physical classroom. Camera must be switched ‘ON’ for both educators and learners. This will enable you to pick up on non-verbal cues expressed by learners during the lesson.
- Take into consideration the different dynamics which might be taking place at the learners’ house including limitations in accessing technology, personal and private space as well as support available.
- Make your virtual classroom a pleasant place to be as much as possible.
- Balance out the amount of screen time with hands on/non-screen activities.
- Keep in mind online safety for learners. Set clear rules and parameters to the online interactions.
- Avoid surprises.
- In case any material/resource will be needed for a specific lesson, make sure that it reaches learners and/or their parents in due time.
- Be present and actively involved.
- Build a trustworthy relationship.

A Link to an *Online and Distance Learning Toolkit for Primary Schools* compiled by the Digital Literacy Primary Team is found here

Secondary: <https://digitalliteracy.skola.edu.mt/dlts-secondary/>

Primary: <https://primarydigital.skola.edu.mt/>