

Supporting Student Collaboration in a Virtual Setting: General Education and Small Group Services

Teaching students to engage with one another in virtual settings can be addressed similarly to the ways educators establish routines and procedures at the start of the year. Students need educators and administrators to support their learning by explicitly teaching and modeling expectations, as well as providing feedback to reinforce and redirect behaviors for learning. It is important to take time to provide clear expectations for student learning and collaboration in virtual settings, as it cannot be assumed students will know how to translate expectations from a brick-and-mortar classroom to a digital learning setting. When directions are clearly expressed for the setting and various tasks within the lesson, both students and educators can focus time and efforts on learning.

In this guide, you will find:

- **Norms** for virtual instructional settings
- **Teaching tools** for explicit modeling and scaffolding of student collaboration
- **Resources** for extending learning with feedback and coaching conversations

Marshall has additional related resources for

- [Sustaining Engagement of Students with Disabilities in Distance Learning](#)
- [Supporting Teachers with Accommodations](#)
- [Small Group Virtual Instruction](#)

Audience: General Education Teachers, Special Education Teachers and Service Providers

Be Proactive: Set Clear Expectations

Just like at the beginning of the school year, creating group norms with students will help establish buy-in and agency. Having explicit norms for student learning also provides a safe learning environment and helps build community among students. Where possible, include students in the generation of the norms in the form of a class contract or shared agreements. When establishing expectations with students, make sure to document them for reference later and review them with students at the start of instruction. Several examples of digital learning norms with expectations for both students and educators can be referenced below:

- [Online Norms Example](#) (UWC Singapore)
- [Online Learning Day Example](#) (De LaSalle High School)
- [Online Rules and Norms Models](#) (Utah Virtual Academy)

Begin Each Activity with Norms

Make sure to establish norms for different learning tasks, and review those norms before sending students out to specific tasks (e.g. partner work, break out rooms, etc). Norms can be written out on a downloadable task card or brainstormed by the group and written into a slide. Whatever the format, norms are recommended to be concrete, written out, and positively framed.

- Develop explicit norms for chat discussions during live lessons. Guiding questions to ask when developing norms together with students might include:
 - ◆ When and how do we ask questions?
 - ◆ When do we use emoticons?
 - ◆ How do we respond to one another in chat?
 - Students may have answers to each others' questions. Just as in class, they may need to ask quick questions of peers that does not interrupt whole group instruction
- Provide guidelines for discussion boards and posts. Catlyn Tucker's article, "[Creating a Safe Digital Space](#)" offers these guidelines as an example:

Guidelines for Online Discussion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Use names to set a friendly tone ◆ Read questions and postings carefully in order to avoid confusion ◆ Compliment your peers for strong ideas or helpful contributions to the discussion ◆ Ask questions to gain clarity or further information ◆ Be considerate by using direct and respectful language ◆ Respond instead of reacting. If you are upset or angry, take a break before responding ◆ Critique the content, not the person ◆ Avoid using all caps (it is considered yelling)

Teach and Model Collaborative Practices

In order to practice collaboration and communicate kindly and effectively with one another, students will need explicit teaching and modeling, as well as visual references or guides to support their work together. Providing visuals reinforces and maintains clear, written expectations for students and educators about interacting with each other. Educators can use multiple modalities for teaching and learning collaboration skills, including use of structured lessons and videos, daily polls or community building questions, and real time modeling within group interactions for instruction.

Plan with Purpose

Break down group tasks or assignments ahead of time. If the assignment being given requires students to take on roles or work together, ensure the work expected and roles for engagement are available before students begin. Do not expect students to know how to break work apart and assign roles on their own. Use group task cards (see [CommonSense Education example](#)) for students to clearly state their responsibilities for parts of a project or assignment, and where they are collaborating or reviewing work of others. Need more tips? Check out the video on [“Creating Group Work in Google Classroom”](#)

Use Lessons and Video Tools

Teach Digital Literacy. While students might have strong communication skills for in-person collaboration, digital literacy teaches students to be thoughtful consumers and contributors to online content and learning by calling out changes they may need to make for virtual collaboration and discussions. Educators may consider using lessons for online collaboration and communication. CommonSense has a page for [essential digital citizenship lessons](#) that contains lessons for high school students around online communication and cyberbullying.

Present Frequent Opportunities to Practice

Provide varied and ongoing practice options. Students may be able to practice in-person with one another during a lesson or as a small group or partner practice. Ideas for practice with direct points of contact include:

- Using breakout rooms for small group discussions
- Partnering students for conversations by phone call to interview one another or have a discussion about a topic of interest

To encourage collaboration between peers outside of direct contact with one another, educators can use a wide variety of options. Ideas include:

- Using discussion boards. Set up questions for discussion, post expectations for participation (i.e. respond to at least two peers) and remind students of norms for collaborative language
- Post daily questions for discussion. This gives students opportunities to practice collaboration by composing written answers and responding to one another
- Collaboratively annotate texts. Reading alongside peers and interacting with comments, questions and connections posted by others can create a seminar-style experience online and add to a sense of community

Opportunities for frequent and diversified peer collaboration will support students to improve and overcome barriers they may face around peer interactions. For example, students who are shy or less likely to speak up have more equitable opportunities to share ideas and interact with peers when they respond in pairs or in writing. Using poll questions that anonymizes data can remove additional barriers for students with anxiety to share preferences or opinions. Follow up practice with built in opportunities for reflection to encourage students to celebrate their progress and consider areas for improvement.

Model with Tools and Visuals

Provide sentence frames or models for collaboration in a virtual space. Students might benefit from frames for group discussions, partner assignments or written collaboration on discussion boards and peer review feedback.

<p><i>To ask a clarifying question or ask for help:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Could you repeat that please? ● Could you explain the meaning of the word ...? ● What is the relationship between ... and ...? ● In this part of the text it says ... but I don't understand why/how this happened. ● To be clear, you're saying that ...? ● So what you're saying is ...? ● Could someone help me with ...? ● I need some help working on ... Could you help me with it? ● Could you help me break that down? 	<p><i>To ask for proof or explanation of thinking:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Can you explain your thinking on that? ● I do not understand. Would you please tell me why...? ● Can you give me an example of that? ● Where in the text did you find evidence to support your thinking? ● Couldn't it also be that ...?
<p><i>To express agreement or add on:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The data/research supports your argument there because ... ● I agree with your point, and think a better way to say that might be ... ● Something to note here is ... ● Adding to what X said, ... 	<p><i>To express disagreement:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I'm not sure I agree with that point because... ● I think the disadvantages would outweigh the advantages. Consider... ● The evidence I've seen suggests something different ● One could argue that ... ● On the other hand, I think that ...

Assign Support Roles for Students

Provide students roles to facilitate student-directed learning. Assigning students roles gives them structured opportunities to engage in learning that is supportive for peers and builds a safe learning community. Student roles also develop a sense of shared ownership of learning and provide students authentic leadership opportunities in their everyday lives. Student roles in learning can also serve as a behavioral replacement strategy for students who are seeking peer approval and attention.

Role	Description	Rationale for Use
Notetaker	Assign one or more students to take notes during the lesson. This might include notes for all instruction, discussion notes, or follow up items. The notetaker role should be assigned to a student who is able to simultaneously participate and notetake, or a student who volunteers to share notes with peers at the end of lesson.	Ensures notes are captured for students who could not attend instruction live and provides notes for accommodation of students with disabilities or other learning needs.
Timekeeper	Students keep time for one or more aspects of the lesson. This might include giving time signals for keeping pace of the lesson, independent work timekeeping,	Provides opportunities for student leadership and ownership of the learning community. Creates a replacement role for students who might be off-task or need time reminders.
Positive Points Tracker	A student keeps track of positive points earned by peers during the lesson for behavior tracking.	Allows teachers to attend to other learning needs of the group when smaller tasks are managed by students.
Pollster(s)	Students record peer responses during check for understanding in lesson	

Provide Feedback and Coaching

Students may need guidance on using online tools and sharing a digital learning space with peers. Establish communication methods and schedules so students know when and how they can reach out with questions or to ask for help with peer interactions. Coaching students on the transition to learning on a digital platform with peers can preempt using learning tools as toys and minimize distractions. As in a traditional classroom, providing students positive, direct and specific feedback will help ensure students are following the explicit expectations for interacting and collaborating in the virtual environment. Enrolling administrators and families in the guidance of interactions can also help students navigate social problem solving across learning environments. Here are a few tools to support this:

- Use positive reinforcement: find opportunities to authentically praise students and groups for collaborating in expected and effective ways.
 - ◆ Praise students for using academic language stems (“*Great use of academic language to add on an idea!*”)
 - ◆ Highlight skills and examples from groups about how they are collaborating and solving problems together. (“*I noticed in [group] there was some confusion about*”)

the role each person was taking. The group took a minute to go back to the checklist and clarify with one another and that seems to have helped avoid conflict. Great work [group])

- Teach problem solving and conflict resolution skills.
 - ◆ Help students consider other perspectives and brainstorm ways to approach or respond to conflict with peers. Tools like [social thinking maps](#) or [size of the problem visuals](#) are useful for supporting students with autism or pragmatic language deficits.
 - ◆ Rehearse conversations with students. Give them a chance to make mistakes while also receiving feedback and validation for their effort. Skills can be taught through role play, games or direct instruction.

- Provide cueing to students for opportunities to interact with peers
 - ◆ In 1:1 conversations or chats, educators might cue students struggling with social interaction to identify opportunities to compliment peers, ask a question, or thank someone for feedback. Students with executive functioning and pragmatic skill deficits may especially benefit from these cues.

Final Word

Providing students with opportunities to interact and engage with one another builds community and teaches real-world skills for collaboration. Students can be provided multiple modalities for collaboration with one another within synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities, such as live discussions, group assignments, peer reviews and discussion boards. While students learn and engage with one another, educators should be proactive in establishing **expectations and norms** and **regularly teach, model and coach** students in their interactions with one another. Some students will easily transition to the virtual learning space, while others will need direct support and guidance to navigate the change in their learning environment.



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