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Surviving and Thriving:
Tips and Tricks for Distance Learning and Music Education

Distance and blended learning will be part of the educational landscape into the future. Thanks, COVID-19. No one can tell us how long it will be before we get back to "normal." Or to what extent the "new normal" will include blended learning – a hybrid of online learning and in-person instruction. Likely, different schools across the country will strive to find an effective balance of distance and classroom instruction to meet the needs of students while keeping everyone safe and healthy.

Teaching in person is exhausting. Teaching online is even more exhausting because we're not getting live feedback and serotonin bump from making music in person. If your school suddenly went dark and you are struggling on your own, here are 5 reminders for *surviving* from my training and experience as a certified distance educator.

1. Online instruction requires at least 3 times the prep as in person instruction.
   - Develop a road map, like a 1-2 week plan. Prep 1-2 class sessions ahead.
   - Be patient with yourself about getting things ready online. Kids don't need everything at once. Pace yourself. You will have everything ready in time for the designated class meetings or student work periods.

2. Be available during class meeting times and respond to email during designated "office hours."
   - Do not feel that kids need an immediate response outside of school hours. Monitoring your email constantly will drain the life from you. (And you'll be keeping to your teaching contract.)
   - Use school-sponsored email and communication tools. In many school districts, this is required for Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) or Open Public Records Act (OPRA) reporting.
   - Consider NOT synching your school communications to your cell phone. Keeping your cell phone as personal space may help save your sanity.

3. Set up an online discussion forum that's a general class hangout for Q&A.
   - Encourage students to use that discussion space to ask and answer questions together as they arise, as well as to discuss assignments and share projects.
   - Let the kids support one another with content and tech issues.
   - Most learning management systems have a discussion forum feature so that you can monitor these student-student communications during your designated time. Using a school-sponsored platform for student interaction also keeps everything FOIA/OPRA compliant.

4. When doing synchronous (real time) videoconferencing or webinars:

- Be online 5-10 minutes before the designated start of class.
- Check the background where you are working. Try to minimize visual distractions behind you.
- Use a headset. Encourage kids to use one also. The mic on your headset can help minimize audio intrusions like the sounds of family members and pets into your time with students.
- Encourage kids to turn off their cameras while delivering instruction--saves bandwidth for less glitching
- Mute the mic for students/participants (easy to do in Zoom, WebEx and other video conferencing tools)
- Have kids use the chat window for questions while you are presenting/screen sharing
- When screen sharing, ask to verify that they are seeing what you intend to share. Some platforms like Zoom require the presenter to change intended screen if you have multiple windows open.
- Have an open Q&A before ending the webinar with student cameras optional. Allow students to control whether their mics are muted.
- Do take attendance!
- If you are presenting instruction that all students need, record that part of the session to post online later in case anyone misses it or needs to check back about content you presented or get clarification about assignments. (depending on the capabilities of the platform you're using)

5. Take good care of yourself.
    - Log out for your lunch break. Really.
    - Remember to drink enough water. (Too much coffee? Guilty!)
    - Get up out of your seat between classes, or at least once an hour. Most of us are physically active while in school. Sitting for long periods of time will mess you up.
    - Go outside at least once a day. Get some exercise.
    - Play/create/listen to music *just for you*. Expending all of your creative energy on your students can drain you. Devoting that energy to yourself is energizing.
    - Don't take it personally when students don't respond online or show up for a scheduled online meeting. They are having issues adjusting and coping too. Follow up on non-participating students using the protocol your school recommends.

So how can you and your students *thrive* in this really challenging time? Music technology can support higher levels of student creativity and independent musicianship. Consider using these types of tools to boost student engagement and accountability when in-person music-making isn't an option.

1. Teacher Tools

- Online classrooms and learning management systems (LMS) help keep students and teachers on schedule and in touch with one another. Beyond scheduling, lesson material hosting, and communication, it may be time for you to explore two other areas of your online school: shared resources, and the assessment capabilities of your platform.
  - In addition to 'Teachers-Pay-Teachers,' 'Pinterest,' and other social media platforms, each LMS has a closed community for users. In most cases, like with Canvas and Google Classroom, communities of teacher share resources freely. On *MusicFirst*, teachers can share at will within their own school districts. The Shared Content Library contains a wealth of ready-to use, customizable lessons, assessments, and courses created, vetted, and curated by music teachers, and is free to all subscribing teachers.
  - While Google Classroom users tend to use Google Forms as quizzes, full learning management systems like *MusicFirst*, *Blackboard, Canvas, and Schoology* have built-in assessment tools capable of many different question types.
- Document camera or external web cam. Having a decent camera that you can position over a written exercise or in front of your instrument is essential. Check out the Ipevo V4K Ultra High Definition USB Document Camera (about $99). For more functionality, try the Hovercam Solo 8 (about $199). Ask your school will get one for you, since you are bearing the overhead costs of work space and internet access.

2. Collaborative Composition
- *Noteflight Learn*, used within MusicFirst, Google Classroom, or as a standalone product allows students to share scores & collaborate, much as with Google Docs or Slides. Students can work together and comment on projects shared with them. From the teacher side, you have access to every composition students have created.
- *Soundtrap* provides collaboration that offers video chat as bonus. Like with Noteflight, Soundtrap allows users to invite other as collaborators.
- Regardless of your choice of software, provide clear written instructions and model projects for students. When possible, screen record yourself going through the process for each step of the composition, narrating your inner thinking along the way. Share that video with students in your LMS.
- Use lesson ideas from the web/lesson libraries as a starting point. Every teacher has specific preferences for lesson design. Customize the lessons you find online to save steps instead of creating activities from scratch.

3. Music Learning Software
- *Focus on Sound* offers an expansive array of lessons sequenced directly into quizzes. Many educators only have students explore the Instrument Dictionary. This is only the beginning. Complete lessons in music listening, theory, and music tech/production can be scheduled for students, providing robust and engaging learning.

- Theory and Ear training software such as *Musition* and *Auralia* give students the support needed to grow their skills in a scaffolded environment. Teachers can track student independent progress, whether students are working at an individual pace or completing assigned exercises.

4. Music Practice and Performance
   - Audio and recording are must-haves. Whether using an in-LMS recorder such as the 'Record Audio' feature in MusicFirst or internal recording like 'Studio' in Canvas, music teachers rely on recordings from students to assess progress remotely. Many students use their smart phones and tablets to record their performances. Recommend that students upload all performances to an online folder that they share with you as a backup in case uploading to your LMS doesn't work properly.
   - *PracticeFirst* and *SmartMusic* offer online music practice and real-time feedback. If you teach an ensemble course and are not using one of these tools, request demo accounts online. Become comfortable with each, then make a decision based on function and the kind of feedback the software will provide you and your students.
   - *Sight Reading Factory* is a staple of online learning for many music programs. Teachers can configure assignments for difficulty, key, pitch, and rhythm content, then the software auto-generates exercises. Students also have the option for "free practice" at the level of their choosing.

Music teachers are natural planners and project managers. And we are obsessive about getting things right for our students. Give yourself the same flexibility you are giving your students. Take some time to step back, assess what is working, what tech tools make you happy, and explore some other options. Perhaps by end of summer, we will all will have found our happy place with distance or blended learning.


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