



F.O.N.T.

Focus On New Teachers

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Congratulations!

You've made it through to the midyear mark!

5 Ways to Take Some of the Distance Out of Distance Learning

It's important this year to keep connecting with students and fostering their engagement in learning.

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Teachers understand the importance of physically being in the [student space of the classroom](#). It's essential for engaging students who are off track, for making specific points, and for energizing already on-task learners. But how can we connect with students when we're separated by either a computer screen or the physical barriers we currently need to keep everyone safe in the classroom?

The following are five ideas we've tried this year with middle school and college students—they should also work with the high school students in between.

1. BE DRAMATIC—SHOUT AND WHISPER

When we notice early sleepers still arising, students with pre-lunch cravings or post-lunch comas, or end-of-the-day clock watchers—in other words, students who are distracted for various reasons throughout the day—we find that, whether we're teaching in person in a mask or virtually via Zoom, alternating between using a booming voice and a conspiratorial whisper draws students into the drama of our learning experiences.

It sounds simple, and that's the point. We need simple ideas in complex times.

2. FOCUS ON CONNECTING WITH STUDENTS

We have to engage our students, particularly those who are struggling, in just a few moments of conversation. The need is especially real for students who don't normally participate in class or in online calls.

If you're teaching virtually, take two minutes four times a week before or after a synchronous session to ask individual students about their weekend and their interests. The best time is usually right before or after class, but reaching out with a phone call works as well. Continuing to follow up with them a few times a week for a brief two-minute conversation is the key. The two minutes four times a week can also be one minute three times a week, or even one minute one time a week. You can do this with one or more students per week.

These are slimmed down versions of the [Two by Ten approach](#), which has been shown to measurably improve student behavior. The point is that you are initiating a real connection with a student, and that can break down all types of walls.

3. MAKE SURE EVERYONE SPEAKS

Every member of the class should expect to speak in every class, and the norm should be that everyone contributes. Our classes are richest when all perspectives are included.

Cold calling is controversial, but it's possible to take the sting out of cold calling and transform the downsides into a warm invitation to share thoughts. A wise teacher knows when to bring each student into a conversation through round robin questions that elicit a response from everyone or rapid questioning that allows many students to participate in a limited time frame.

There are many ways to ask questions that [help students feel safe](#), such as using a tool like [Mentimeter](#) to make participation anonymous while ensuring that every student gives feedback.

Keep engaging students and let them feel the warmth of participation, and make sure the classroom is a place where it's OK to be wrong because we come together to learn.

4. REALLY SEE EACH STUDENT

Students need to hear about the good work they're doing—and they're achieving a lot of amazing work this season.

General or generic praise, however, not only gives students a false sense of accomplishment but can also lead to praise becoming meaningless. Be specific with praise, and use this as another opportunity to break down that dividing wall.

5. SEL, EARLY AND OFTEN

Regularly attending to the social and emotional needs of students establishes a focus on well-being. In class, try to incorporate [social and emotional learning activities](#), whether as a stand-alone, or, to really maximize the benefit, incorporated into a lesson plan.

In elementary through early middle school, give students words to describe their feelings using the framework of the [Zones of Regulation](#). Older students can be given assignments that lead them to connect their learning to their community, such as asking family members, religious leaders, and other potential mentors about their experiences.

The point of all of these strategies is to engage and connect with students, no matter what the distance. If one of these ideas stands out to you, try it. And remember, we need to [say no to some things](#) so that we can say yes to the best things. To un-distance distance learning, make sure to first take care of yourself so that you can take care of those entrusted to you.