

## Remember, Online Learning Isn't the Only Way to Learn Remotely



5 ways to activate students' passion during a school closure

*By Kate Ehrenfeld Gardoqui*

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“What a whirlwind time we are in. It's changing so fast!”

Emails like this one from a Maine principal filled my inbox this week as the school leaders with whom I work rushed to prepare their faculties for imminent school closures.

The anxiety is shared by students. Suddenly everything is uncertain. Everyone in the education system is facing a deluge of questions as parents and teachers struggle to figure out how to continue students' learning when the school building is closed.

The challenges are overwhelming. Just as overwhelming is the infinite variety of online resources that are touted as answers to these questions: an interminable ocean of unfamiliar tools and online lessons of dubious quality.

Online learning tools will provide tremendous possibilities while schools are closed. But as both a parent and an instructional coach, I deeply hope that teachers and schools will remember that online learning is not the only way to learn. If teachers feel pressured to design online lessons which require students to put in hours sitting at a computer, or if secondary school students are receiving instructions from six or seven different teachers who all want them to put in the equivalent of a class period at the computer, the result for students may be not educational but mind-numbing. It does not need to be that way.

This time of school closure provides a magnificent opportunity for us to envision a kind of learning that is different from what happens in our classrooms. We can invite students to learn something that they are curious about or practice a skill that is important to them, and we can connect their learning back to our educational standards. Students may not learn all the content that we had thought we would cover this month. But that loss can be balanced by tremendous benefits. The transferable skills that are embedded in all state and national standards are among the most essential skills we give our students. And assignments which invite students to engage in regular practice, creation, or connection will deliver mental-health benefits to counteract the stress of living through a pandemic.

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Teachers in all subject areas can create challenges like these for their students:

**1. Practice a skill that is important to you.** As you practice, keep a log of your practice hours (or a video log). Create an audio, video, or written reflection about the skill you have practiced, why it is important to you, and how your practice during this school closure has pushed you to demonstrate self-discipline, openness to feedback, listening skills, attention to detail, or any other transferable skill.

If your school has a list of guiding principles, transferable skills, or work habits, this reflection should be explicitly grounded in those.

**2. Follow your curiosity.** Is there something you have been wanting to learn? Is there something you are curious about, or that you are researching on your own? Perhaps you have been saving for a car, and you want to research different models. Perhaps you are curious about how viruses move from animals to humans, or about the life story of someone you admire. Teachers can adjust requirements about what kinds of sources to use and how students should communicate their research according to grade level and subject. This assignment connects well with social studies research standards.

**3. Create something you are proud of.** It can be anything at all; a video, a song, a piece of artwork, a treehouse, a modification on a car, an animation or cartoon, a piece of clothing (or a modification of a piece of clothing), a recipe or a fancy meal or dessert, or anything else. Write or record a reflection about what you created. Use the reflection to critique your creation and contemplate how your work during this school closure pushed you to demonstrate transferable skills.

This activity can be connected with art or health standards that focus on setting goals, planning, or critiquing and revising work.

**4. Find a way to help your community.** Contact your town hall or local community service organization to find out ways to help that comply with public-health guidance on safe social distancing. Write or record a reflection about what you did to help, why it is important to you, and how you demonstrated transferable skills.

**5. Find a spot where you can observe the natural world.** If possible, return to this spot—even if it just means observing a single tree—each day for at least 20 minutes. Try to go in all weathers. Keep a journal describing your observations—what you see, hear, feel, and smell. Keep track of a seedling or sprout and watch how it changes. See if certain birds hang out in your tree. Draw what you see.

This activity may not be possible for all students, so teachers will need to adjust based on location. Teachers can give students specific journal assignments each day or allow students to choose how they will write in a journal each day. Students who do not have access to the outdoors can instead use their journaling to record what it feels like to live through this challenging moment in history. This task can be designed to support writing, ecology, or health standards.

These types of assignments can't replace all schooling and will not be appropriate in all classes. But if some teachers can simply design requirements for students to do something each day that connects with their own passions or which enables them to connect with others or with the natural world, this will convey tremendous benefits in this time of fear.

Not only will time spent on these pursuits feel meaningful to students, but when they return and share their work with their classmates, they will learn about one another, and teachers will get to know them more deeply. My 17 years of experience as a public school teacher tells me that when we invite students to pursue their passions and seek connection, they will astonish us with their curiosity, creativity, and generosity. Let's open the door for them to do so.

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