

Connecting With Students Through a Phone Call

Email can feel impersonal, but calling students conveys warmth and can lead to a deeper connection.

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Online Learning



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In June, I began to teach a new group of 54 girls remotely and asynchronously. Given that the only piece of knowledge

I had about these students was their names, it was arguably scarier and more difficult than the switch to remote learning in March when I did it with a group I had been teaching for two years.

Now, nearly three months later, I have a lot more information about each of my students than I ever thought possible. The one tech tool that helped me achieve this was the good old telephone.

In these strange times in the midst of a pandemic, nothing tells a student that you are invested in them personally more than a phone call. Even in a five-minute conversation, the teacher gets to intently listen to the student as if no one and nothing else matters, easily trumping group Zoom calls and prerecorded video messages.

More important, I have been able to gather significant information about a student's home life and how they're engaging with my classes, and I'm confident that no survey could have produced this data. I have learned about time, motivation, and attention management issues, as well as network issues that force them to work from the terrace of their houses, overwhelm due to too many pending tasks, misunderstandings in the content, and a myriad of tech issues such as multiple Edmodo accounts and forgotten passwords. This data informed my subsequent lessons and improved my instruction delivery significantly.

I spent a lot of time calling students over the first two weeks of class. That allowed me to reach every student at the beginning of the term. Since then, I have been calling students who need immediate attention as soon as I find out they need help. That usually amounts to one or two calls a day. I also set aside two or three consecutive days a month when I do nothing but call each child.

6 Ways to Use Phone Calls to Support Students

1. Checking in to appreciate: Even pre-corona, it has always been hard for me to remember to make appreciation calls home. Calling the student to appreciate them for their work signals to them that you see them and their work despite being far away. It proves to them that their learning matters to you. It helps students who are doing well to continue to do well.

2. Checking in to remind: Many of my students need reminders for retakes (I insist that students retake my formative assessments if they score below a certain percentage). A two-minute reminder phone call goes a long way in preventing future learning gaps for the student. It is far more effective in conveying my tone and what matters to me compared with a message or an email that might inadvertently appear to warn about a looming deadline

instead of gently remind.

3. Checking in to find out why: Sometimes, the student is a week or two behind, appears to have submitted an assignment in a hurry, or has skipped assignments. I have found that reminder messages or emails in such cases work for only a small minority of students. Most of the time, a listening ear over a phone call helps diagnose underlying issues ("But that's just a Google Form; am I required to proofread before I submit?" or "I didn't notice assignment 9e.") and fix them once and for all.

4. Reteaching or clarifying key concepts: Asynchronous remote learning makes it hard to honor the fact that learning and teaching is a two-way street. No matter how much I think and rethink about what misconceptions students might have or encounter and account for them in my lesson plans, I have always met a student with a question I couldn't have come up with myself. From student responses in Google Forms, I am able to assess fairly correctly if certain students need reteaching or a key clarification to move forward in their learning. Phone calls make students' thinking instantly clear to me and help me present the content to them the way they need it. Insight into student thinking also helps make my future lessons better.

5. Supporting students on retakes: Sometimes, a reminder message or email about a retake is enough. But

sometimes the responses in Google Forms make it abundantly clear that the student needs more support, without which she might end up retaking the quiz multiple times and lead herself into a zone of unnecessary frustration. In such cases, I call the student and guide her through the retake. She succeeds in the retake, and I get to learn about the student's knowledge and thinking process.

6. Helping students get organized: During this unprecedented time, many students require help with organizing themselves, irrespective of whether they have learning difficulties. Almost all issues concerning organization and executive function are invisible through work submitted online. Phone calls have helped me get to the bottom of the issue and suggest solutions immediately:

- "I made a planner, but I can't find it now": Stick your planner on the wall.
- "I saw your message about the retake but forgot about it": From now on, enter retakes in your planner as soon as you see my message.

Although student surveys (written, audio, or video) exist and can help us gather useful information about our students asynchronously, too many students fall through the cracks. Often those are the ones who need the most help. Sometimes all it takes is a phone call from their teacher to identify the problem and get them back on track.

