5 SECRETS TO BEING MORE Proactive WITH YOUR ONLINE STUDENTS
One of the biggest challenges with hybrid or online learning is being proactive.

It is so easy as virtual school teachers to find ourselves in reactive mode, simply responding to problems that arise rather than proactively helping our students achieve success.

• How do we get students what they need when they need it?
• How do we reach out before they check out?
• How do we know who needs help now?

These are questions I wrestled with in over a decade as a virtual teacher, where I worked with thousands of precalculus students. I want to share some of the secrets I have learned, and a few that I picked up from colleagues who have also been successful in this challenging educational format.

You are the key to your students’ success!

The research shows that the key factor in students succeeding in online learning is the quantity and quality of interactions with their online teacher.

Read on to find 5 secrets on how you can be more proactive with your elearning students.
SECRET 1: Go Live

That’s right, turn your camera on!

And make sure they turn theirs on too. It’s so important that your online students know that you’re a real person, with a real face, that shows real care for them. Build this into the instructional design of your courses.

In my online courses, the first assignment is the “Mandatory Zoom Meeting.” I use the completion tracking in my Learning Management System to stop students from progressing past a certain point in the course until they have had that initial “get-to-know-you” meeting.

If the students don’t want to turn their camera on, I ask them to show me a piece of ID and smile for the camera as part of our record-keeping process as a school. Now that we have had a chance to speak face to face, I find that students are much more receptive to me poking and prodding into their work habits and effort. This results in higher quality interactions, which leads to more consistent success.
Stop Giving Marks!
(at least some of the time)

The research shows that students are much more likely to read your **formative feedback** if there isn’t a letter or percentage grade for the assignment.

I found this to be true with my students when we switched to **mastery-based** assignments that didn’t assign a number. Instead, we used assignments in the course as a gateway assignment to gauge whether or not students were ready for a test. If we felt they weren’t ready to achieve their own personal goal for a unit, then we would give comments highlighting what the student was understanding and where they needed additional practice. **This led to much greater engagement and discussion than when I used to write big red numbers at the top of the page.**

So take a look at your course right now and consider where you can change some assignments to “**completion only**”; give yourself room to create formative feedback that your students will more likely read.
Track Every Interaction

Time to sharpen that HB pencil because you are about to take some notes on your students. That’s right. Every time that you interact with a student, take notes on what happened in that interaction. Why?

Because we forget things.

But taking notes on every interaction with every student sounds like an organizational nightmare, so I want to share an amazing way of doing it that I learned from a colleague. She created a Trello “board” with a “card” for each student. Then she could use all the tools built into this modern project management platform to track all of her interactions (conversations, emails, important assignment notes) with her students.
Here are a few benefits of using a system like this for your student notes:

- **Searchable**
  Just type a student's name in and you can find their card instantly.

- **Timestamps**
  Typing a quick comment on a card makes a time-logged note so you don't have to track dates manually.

- **Categories**
  You can color code students or use columns to flag important information.

- **Reminders**
  Every time you are on a task, move the due date out by ten days, so that if you don't have another interaction within that ten days, then you know it is time to proactively reach out.

So whether you use a modern tool like Trello, something like Google sheets, or your trusty old notebook and pencil, you will discover that keeping a student log is a very useful practice.
SECRET 4:

Be Over Informed

This is where we start to really level up our game as an elearning teacher: when we learn to be really good at checking the systems we have created and the tools we are equipped with every time we interact with our students.

Why does this make you more proactive?

Any time you are about to interact with a student, either live, through an email, or marking an assignment, you should have your own personal dashboard about that student on all your screens.

Wait, you mean you are teaching online and you don’t have at least four monitors?

So what do I mean by a “personal dashboard”?
Every digital record you have about that student should be visible as you are talking to them.

- Their gradebook.
- The notes you took in Secret #3.
- Their activity reports from your LMS or digital curriculum.
- Notes in your School’s Information System. (SIS)
- Any recent emails from that student.
- Anything else you can think of that is a record associated with that student.

This does take some practice. Some recommendations are to bookmark the search pages in your appropriate systems in your browser, or have them always open on different screens. (I wasn’t kidding about having extra monitors!) That way when you switch between students, you can quickly bring up the next student’s information in all the same systems in a matter of seconds.

But why? Isn’t this overkill?
Not if you want the opportunity to be **proactive**.

You will be amazed how many times you will leave a different comment or have a different conversation because of a piece of information that you gleaned from one of these sources.

**Maybe** a student hasn’t responded to an email you had sent last week. Now you can gently remind them.

**Maybe** a student was missing an assignment from a previous chapter, and now you can be intentional in pointing that out.

**Maybe** a student was skipping through important content that they needed in order to successfully complete what they are working on today. Now you can proactively encourage them.

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**Are you on Amazon yet ordering that fourth monitor?**
SECRET 5:

Get Superpowers

You might not have been born with superpowers or attacked by a mutant spider. However, like Tony Stark or Bruce Wayne, you can have a supercomputer scanning the environment for you, telling you who is falling behind and needs rescuing.

This is where a tool like StudyForge can really level up your proactivity,

because it is listening to every “touch, tap and drag” a student makes while working through their digital curriculum. It can then scan for behaviours that you want it to track, and warn you when you need to intervene.

Imagine waking up each morning to a report of who was skipping videos yesterday, who was jumping too far ahead, and whose progress looked healthy. Imagine being able to reach out to encourage the student you noticed was working extra hard, and see them grinning unexpectedly because you noticed.
Feelimg Noticed.

Perhaps that is one of the hardest things to let your students experience from you in online learning, but perhaps it is the most important. When your students feel noticed and cared for by someone whom they are building a relationship with as opposed to simply receiving grades from, their engagement ramps up. Online learning done well can make this happen as well as, or even better than classroom learning.
At StudyForge we believe that this is possible. In fact, we’ve seen it time and time again. When students are noticed and teachers are proactive, the advantages of online learning can start to outweigh the disadvantages. Personalized learning and pacing becomes the norm, not the exception.

What are you doing to take your online student’s experience to the next level? We would love to hear your thoughts.

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About the Author

Richard Bitgood is the director of StudyForge, a nonprofit that completely replaces the textbook with video curriculum that captivates students and maximizes teacher effectiveness. He has taught math and technology in the classroom and online for 10+ years, and has done every job imaginable in curriculum: writing, editing, software development, technology consulting, project management, sales, and learning-experience design. His passion is for authentic, deep conversations about topics that matter, and this is reflected in the products StudyForge creates. Richard lives in Kelowna, British Columbia with his wife and five children.