

Section 7: Creating a Positive Learning Environment at a Distance

Communicating effectively, enhancing motivation, developing and maintaining rapport, managing online anxiety and practicing digital etiquette are crucial for a positive learning environment. Paying attention to these elements will contribute to the success of your learner and make your sessions more enjoyable.

Communicating Remotely

Remote tutoring comes with its own communication challenges. Non-verbal cues are a huge part of effective communication and there are fewer cues in remote tutoring situations.

If your learner speaks another language or has speech issues, it may be harder to understand over the phone or via online platforms. Technology issues, such as an unstable internet connection or audio delay may be additional barriers.

But there is a lot that can be done to mitigate these factors.

General communication tips (speaking):

- Speak slowly and clearly
- Remember to enunciate well
- Repeat important information
- Be an ever-so-slightly more animated version of yourself on the phone and on video calls – to highlight those non-verbal cues
- Be dynamic with your body language – but not so dynamic that it is distracting
- Be aware of your tone of voice – it carries a lot of impact

General communication tips (listening):

- Pay close attention to verbal cues – use active listening to listen between the lines and pay attention to voice tone
- Demonstrate that you are listening – lean forward, nod, smile, words of encouragement (it can be felt over the phone)

- Do not hesitate to let your learner know if you are having difficulty understanding them – avoid pretending that you understand
- Ask for clarification or paraphrase to make sure you have really heard what your learner has said
- Pay close attention to physical cues if using a video platform – posture, facial expressions, fidgeting, hand gestures, eye contact

Tips if you are struggling to understand your ELL learner:

- Gently and kindly let them know that you are having difficulty
- Keep your voice at a normal level when making inquiries – avoid the temptation to speak loudly
- Despite frustration, keep calm and be patient
- Encourage your learner to use gestures – depending on your learner, you could have fun with this and turn it into a game
- Consider adding texts or email messages as a supplemental way of communicating in tandem with verbal communication

Tips when using technology (share these tips with your learner):

- Eliminate background noise – or at least do your best to keep it to a minimum
- If you experience unexpected background noise while the other person is talking, mute yourself during that period
- Make sure speakers and microphones are not blocked
- Using earbuds will ensure that everything your learner says is only heard by you and it will also improve audio reception – make sure your earbuds are securely plugged in to your device
- Remember to adjust the volume as needed!
- Orient your device to give a clear, well-lit view of your face (avoid being backlit) – when you and your learner are well-lit, observing non-verbal cues is easier
- Make sure your device is on a firm surface to avoid shaking
- Make sure your phone audio and computer audio are not on at the same time – this could lead to an echoing effect
- If your audio is choppy or your video is freezing, check to see that your bandwidth and internet speed are compatible with the videoconferencing platform requirements – if this sounds like gobbledygook to you, then you will need tech support on this!

Boosting Motivation

As in face-to-face tutoring, motivation in a remote learning environment is sustained when learning is learner-driven, goals are relevant and important to your learner and activities are engaging and delivered through an active learning approach.

The basics remain important when creating a motivating remote learning experience:

- Make first steps easy – break things down and start small
- Build on strengths
- Provide meaningful and timely feedback
- Celebrate small wins along the way
- Use active learning

In the remote learning context, here are a few additional tips for boosting motivation:

- Reflect on what motivated your learner in your in-person sessions and do something similar online – get creative!
- Ask your learner what digital skills they want to learn and create goals around those – keep in mind that certain basics will have to be mastered on the way
- Choose some online activities that progress through levels – check our [recommended resources](#) to find some that do this
- Track progress – many online programs allow you to track your progress as you work through activities and some even have a built-in reward system for when you complete levels
- If the resource does not have a built-in progress tracker, set up your own using a spreadsheet or a word document – especially if your learner wants to learn how to create these kinds of documents
- Encourage your learner to keep a list of digital skills that they have mastered – keep adding to that list and see it grow!
- Choose online resources that have multisensory elements – each of our curated resources include information on what multisensory components are present
- Ensure that your learner is comfortable navigating an online resource before they attempt to use it independently
- Try a variety of activities online – at a pace that is comfortable for you and your learner
- Celebrate your wins with emojis, gifs, or an acknowledgement through the mail

Developing and Maintaining Rapport

Building rapport is all about mutual respect, understanding, concern and a positive connection. Find common ground and be warm and empathetic.

You apply these principles brilliantly in your face-to-face interactions with your learner and the good news is that rapport on the phone and online can be built and maintained in all the same ways that you build rapport in person.

The best advice we can give you is to keep doing what you always do and you'll be fine!

Your attitude, body language, what you say and how you listen, are all key to developing and maintaining rapport with your learner. Here are some refresher tips that apply to both in-person and remote situations.

Attitude:

- Spend time at the beginning of each session just talking and sharing
- Show interest in your learner's interests and ideas and build on those in conversation
- Share information about yourself and find common interests or values
- Keep things light and use humour and laughter in the session – try sending humorous and positive emojis or gifs as well!
- Respect is key – respect time, respect confidentiality, respect opinions and ideas
- Be authentic
- Be enthusiastic
- Show empathy
- Be encouraging and give praise in a meaningful way

Body language:

- Maintain an open and relaxed body posture – posture affects tone and mood, so this comes through even on the phone
- Smile – even when you are on the phone, your learner can feel that you are smiling!
- Maintain eye contact about 60% of the time – without making your learner feel uncomfortable
- Lean forward to indicate that you are listening
- Nod while listening
- Mirror your learner's body language if appropriate

What you say and how you listen:

- Reflect back and clarify what has been said by your learner
- Try to match the tone, volume and speed of your learner's speech
- Use words that your learner uses – this emphasizes common ground
- Match your learner's communication style – listen for words like: see and look (visual), hear and listen (auditory), feel and sense (kinesthetic) and use those words in your own communication

Managing Online Anxiety

Tutoring and learning online is a new experience for most of us and it is perfectly natural to be anxious about it.

For many of our learners, it is a brand new and very scary experience. As tutors, we are out of our comfort zones and have the added stress of wanting to give our learners a great learning experience. Feelings of fear, doubt and overwhelm may creep in.

Fear not! There are things you can do to reduce your anxiety and to help your learner to reduce theirs.

Tips for managing online anxiety (for tutors and for learners):

- Have a conversation about any anxious feelings your learner may be having – getting it out in the open often minimizes its power
- Reframe remote learning as an adventure in learning for both of you – because it is!
- Remember to breathe – taking deep breaths together at the start of the session (or during technical mishaps) may be helpful
- Cultivate patience – replace those feelings of discouragement with the long view (good things take time!)
- Humour will be your secret weapon – use it liberally and keep that sense of humour especially when things do not go as planned
- Turn tech challenges into a game – keep a chart of how many tech challenges you have experienced and overcome (celebrate each time you complete five or add five to your list)
- Proceeding in small, manageable steps will keep anxiety at bay – start where you are at and slowly add skills

- Remember that computers are not as fragile as you think and remind your learner of that as well
- A good rule of thumb – if stuck, restart device – often things fix themselves that way
- If you are struggling with a particular tech challenge that prevents you from moving forward or has you and your learner at frustration level, have something up your sleeve that does not require tech – revert to a fun phone activity (have a few of these at the ready, just in case) and try to sort the tech problem out before your next session (call us for help)
- Take breaks if you notice that either of you are getting frustrated – get up and walk around, do something fun and easy or just read a story to your learner
- Use this mantra – It is all learning and learning is good :)

Digital Etiquette During Video Calls

Digital etiquette or “netiquette” is a set of rules and expectations for when you are online. Knowing what is expected and accepted on a video call makes the experience more pleasant and more productive for all concerned.

Here are a few tips:

Before the call:

- Find a private spot with no distractions – do the best you can!
- Warn your family that you are on a private call to minimize interruptions and to preserve confidentiality
- Try to have a background that is not too distracting – a blank wall is ideal
- Wear the same clothing that you would wear to an in-person tutoring session
- Choose front (facing a window) or side lighting – being well-lit helps with non-verbal communication
- Be prepared – have everything you need by your side so you don’t leave the other person staring at an empty chair
- Test your camera and microphone to make sure they are working ahead of time

During the call:

- Be on time – this shows respect and will reduce your learner’s anxiety as they wait to enter the video chat
- Frame the camera correctly so you are within the frame

- Look into the camera (not at yourself), maintaining eye contact with your learner
- Mute yourself if background noise arises while someone else is talking
- Refrain from fidgeting, tapping, rustling through papers – microphones are quite sensitive and it could be distracting
- Refrain from eating while on camera
- Refrain from multitasking on other devices like your phone (unless necessary for tutoring)
- Do what you can to limit interruptions but when they inevitably happen, just be patient and continue when you can
- Keep your sense of humour and flexibility when unexpected things happen

Remember – if at any time you feel that your remote tutoring sessions are not going well, you feel uncomfortable or you sense that your learner is losing interest or motivation – trust your feelings.

The LU office is here to support you as you navigate through this transition. LU staff can talk through any problems and work with you and your learner to find solutions.

Remember, too, that as an organization, LU considers our tutors one of our greatest resources. From time to time there will be workshops and meetings organized so that we can all share our experiences – successes, challenges, concerns, questions and answers.

Check the [LU Calendar](#) on our website for all our tutor events and the [News page](#) for new resources and posts about literacy.