

Teaching to Self-Advocate in Distance Learning

[Teaching K-12 Students to Self-Advocate During Distance Learning | Edutopia](#)

STUDENT VOICE

Teaching Students to Self-Advocate During Distance Learning

Teachers are finding ways to gauge students' understanding of lessons this year, and guiding them to ask for help is a crucial piece of the puzzle.

By [Sarah Kesty](#)

February 10, 2021



Phynart Studio / iStock

Moving our learning experiences from the school building to our homes involved more than packing up our books and devices—the very context and demands of learning shifted. While there are incredible examples of [innovative and determined teachers](#) overcoming the [struggles of distance learning](#), there remain some lasting hurdles, the most pressing of which is teachers' limited ability to gauge understanding.

When we teach in physical settings, we scan our students' faces, body language, and on- and off-task behavior to gauge how well our students are engaging and understanding. We're able to pivot, reteach, or speed up, depending on our read of the class and students' answers to

quick, formative questions. In online learning, however, our ability to see students' faces and hear or read student feedback efficiently is impaired or lost.

Teachers have found fun ways to gather student feedback, like Kahoot or [placing a waterfall](#) in the chat, but there's also a second half to the equation. We can empower all students, including those with learning differences, with strategies to ask for, use, and follow up on help, by teaching them to self-advocate.

TEACHING SELF-AWARENESS

The phrase “you don't know what you don't know” applies particularly well to online learning. Some students are using so much of their cognitive effort on remaining focused, despite having busy home environments, that they are not keeping an awareness of their comprehension. Other students may feel like they're understanding a lesson, only to uncover misunderstandings during their independent work. The first step to teaching self-advocacy is to increase students' metacognition, or thinking about their own thinking.

You can teach metacognition through activities like think-aloud, stop-and-jot, or pair sharing. When doing so, focus your questions on the thought process, not the content. For example, instead of “What do you predict the character will do next?” you can ask, “What clues is your brain finding that would help you make a prediction?” You can ask students to visualize and explain the steps they will take for their independent work rather than using the pat, “Do you have any questions?” closing.

Another component of self-awareness empowerment is teaching students to recognize physical manifestations of confusion that may register in their bodies before they realize consciously that they are not understanding. You can show students an outline of a person and walk them through some of the typical indications of frustration or confusion (faster heart rate, sweat, tension in the hands or arms). Next, you can empower them to recognize these physical feelings and take a quick break to reflect on what in their minds could be causing the feelings. This level of self-awareness can often help them recognize that they need help before they become overwhelmed.

PROMOTING SELF-ADVOCACY

Students need to know how to ask for help now that we often can't as easily recognize their needs. When we teach them to self-advocate, we often alleviate the cognitive load and anxiety that plague the use of new or developing skills. Here are some tips to teach and empower students to ask for help.

In live sessions:

- Give verbal frames for students to get their questions started (“Excuse me, Ms. Smith. I don’t understand”).
- Make clear when it’s OK and not OK to interrupt with a question—if it’s always OK, remind students periodically.

Through email and after class:

- Give students a set of sentence frames for asking for help.

- Teach them how to address an email and how to use the subject line.
- Emphasize specificity by teaching students to name the exact problem or spot they found difficult or to include a video, screenshot, or link to the confusing work.

USING STUDENT QUESTIONS AS A GIFT

As with in-person teaching, when you notice a pattern in students' needs—nearly everyone asks for help on the same math question, for example—you know it's time to reteach. This may feel like another to-do, but challenge yourself to reframe it: Your students just told you how to help them improve before any assessment.

A second way to utilize the gift of student questions is to distinguish between content and process questions. If students are asking for clarity on a text, they need more support with content. If they are asking how to submit their text responses on a platform, that's a process need. Understanding layers of student need can help you address the current assignment, through a quick reteach or clarifying email, and it can help you adjust your plans for future lessons.

If you've lost kids at the directions level or the process side of an assignment, you may never get to see that they are indeed understanding content. The best approach may be to teach the tool again or teach some strategies for approaching multistep directions.

ENCOURAGING STUDENTS WHEN THEY ASK FOR HELP

Let's say you have a student brave and self-aware enough to ask for help. Hooray! Beyond serving their immediate need, you can use your response to also encourage the help-seeking behaviors. Begin every response email with, "Thanks for asking such a great question" or end with, "Great job speaking up for yourself." Students will do more of what pays off, and your kind words will increase the likelihood that they will reach out again.

Another way to reinforce students' self-advocacy is to give live praise and surprise bonus points. After seeing a peer's positive experience asking for help, the kids who are just on the edge of being brave enough to speak up during your live class will be lured into self-advocacy with the prospect of bonus points.

The flipside of this is the potential to shut off self-advocacy, which is unfortunately easy to do. When a student asks a question that you just answered or asks at the wrong time, it's easy to be dismissive or frustrated. Avoid the temptation to respond with annoyance, and instead, start with "thanks for asking." You will notice right away that your tone and approach will feel more positive, which will likely mean more students self-advocating next session.

Our students are learning resilience and creative problem-solving this year, and some self-advocacy will serve them well long after we are through these challenging times.